

RECORD OF WORTENIA WAR



Author: **Ryota Hori**
Illustrator: **bob**



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Now shirtless, Ryoma sat
cross-legged on the bed.
The twins' small, smooth
hands slid over his wide,
muscular back.

"Let's
begin,
then."

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"Dammit, how fast is he?! And he pulls back his thrust so quickly!" Robert jumped back to create more distance between them.

The tube on the spear's shaft slid back and forth, allowing him to thrust and pull back faster.



“The
'chief,'
eh?”

Robert's
eyes glinted
dangerously.

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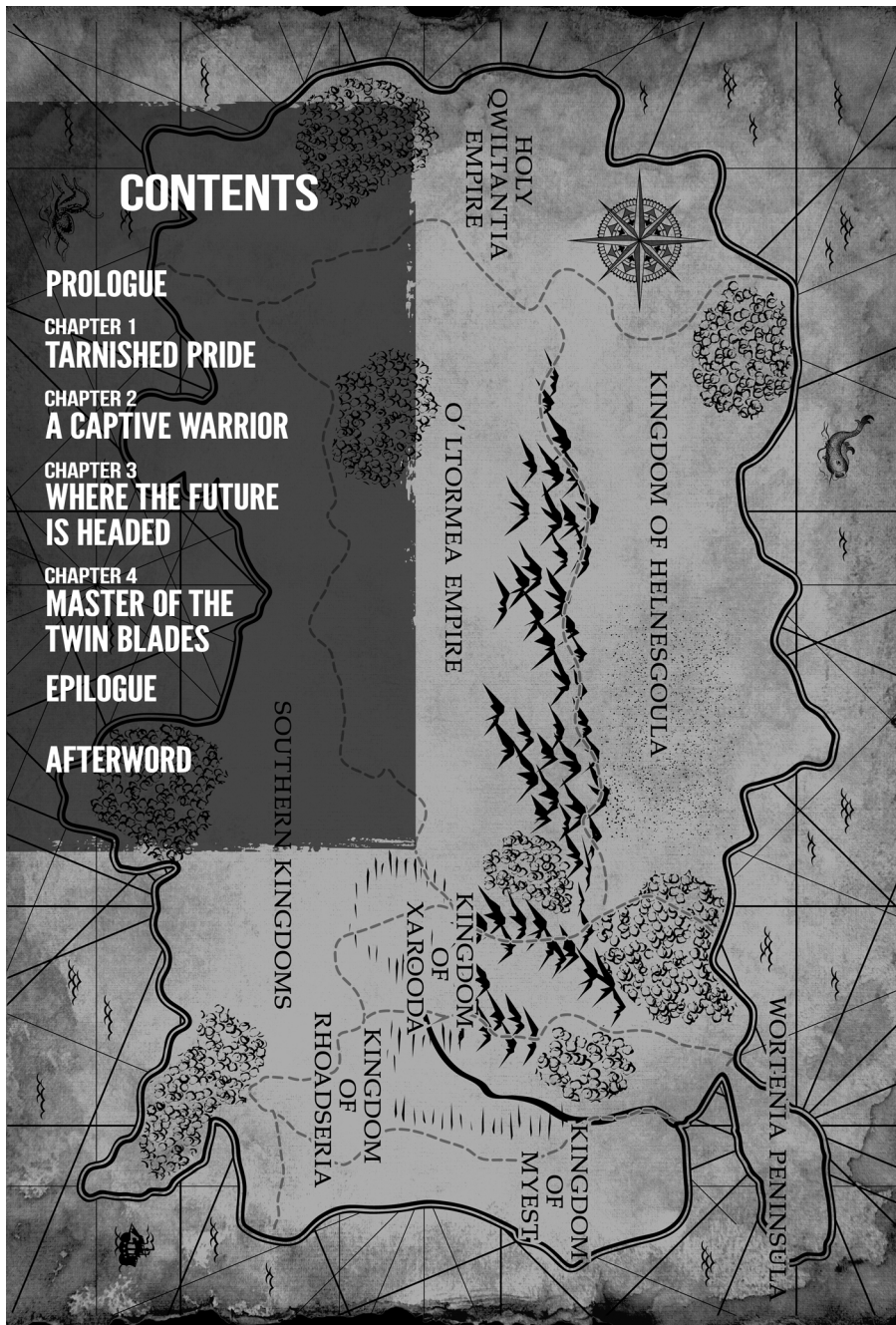
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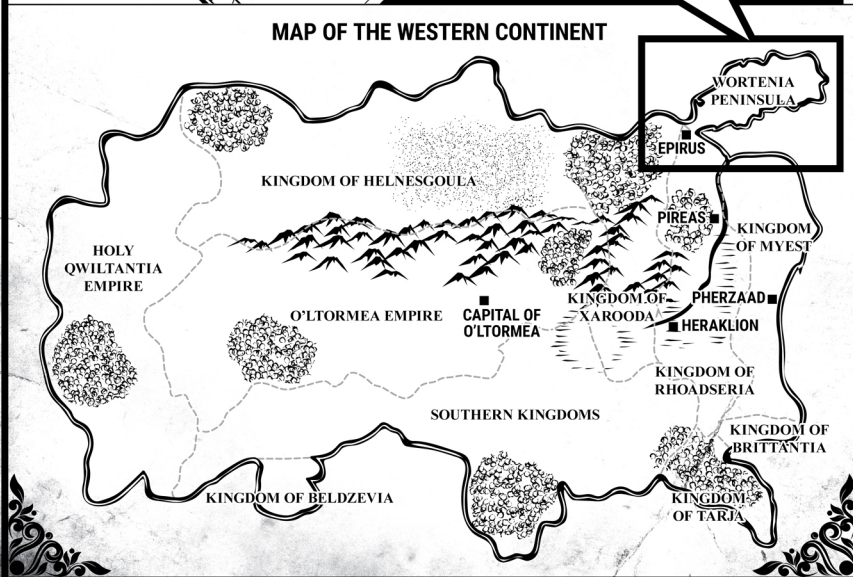
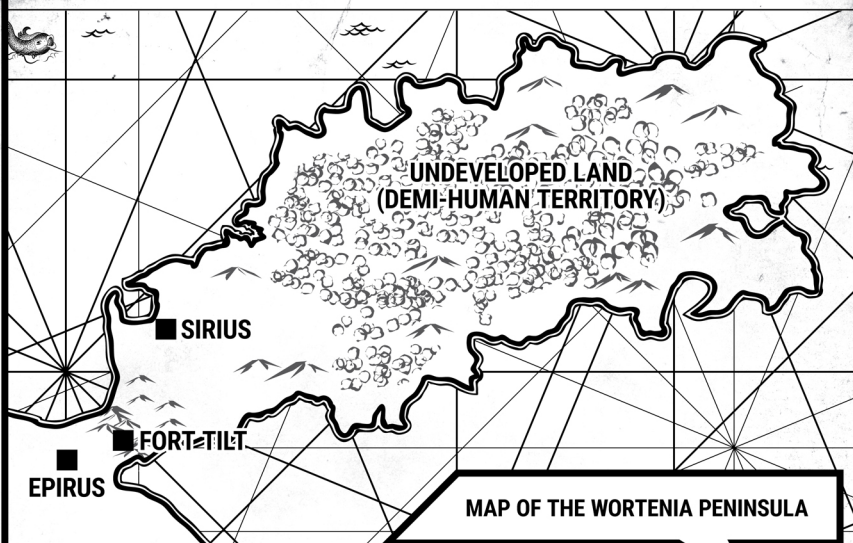
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Prologue

A few hours had passed since Akitake Sudou vanished into the streets of Pireas. Sitting motionlessly in a room at the Mars Pavilion were two men, illuminated by the flickering light of a candle. One of them was Cardinal Roland. The other was a medium-built man in his early to midthirties.

Compared to the people of this world, his appearance was normal. He wore his faded blond hair up in a ponytail, and he had white skin, a slender face, and slanted blue eyes that resembled a weasel or a fox, but otherwise he looked quite plain.

His looks were unmemorable, but upon closer inspection, it became clear that he wasn't an ordinary man. For one, his eyes glinted with a sharpness unseen in normal men. Plus, for how slender he was, his body was exceptionally toned. It wasn't visible through his clothes, so it was hard to discern at a glance, but the thickness of his forearms and the musculature of his neck hinted at the strength underneath. Put simply, his form had a feline ferocity to it.

The man kneeled and looked up at Cardinal Roland, who was sitting calmly on a sofa. Normally, the man's behavior would have been considered disgraceful—one wasn't allowed to lift their head and speak to their master without permission—but there was a strong bond between him and Cardinal Roland, strong enough to absolve any such disrespect. This, in and of itself, demonstrated how much the pleasant-looking old man trusted the younger one. Nevertheless, this failure could fracture that trust.

The man's name was Ricardo, and he was Cardinal Roland's right-hand man and confidant. He handled all the dirty work the cardinal needed done behind the scenes.

If His Eminence feels this way about him, that man must be...

In the ten-odd years Ricardo had spent in the cardinal's service, he could only remember a handful of times when he'd seen the cardinal look so severe. Those times had all occurred at the most decisive of moments and had gone on to be major turning points—turning points for both the Church of Meneos as a whole and Cardinal Roland as an individual. Those events had been so far-reaching that they'd affected every single country on the western continent, like a throwing stone creating ripples on the water's surface.

The Church of Meneos wasn't a nation, but it did have a major

influence on the world. In fact, based on influence alone, the church seemed greater than any one country. The sheer size of it meant its presence was felt throughout the continent, making it a match for the guild, which consolidated the mercenaries and adventurers.

Furthermore, as a religious organization, the Church of Meneos was much closer in nature to a nation than the guild was. The guild was divided into branches, and each branch was fundamentally independent. This meant that cooperation between different guild branches was inadequate and that guildmasters rarely needed to answer to their superiors within the guild. Mercenaries and adventurers mostly felt the guild was a useful organization, but they weren't loyal to it. If the guild's existence was jeopardized, they wouldn't sacrifice themselves to defend it.

The Church of Meneos was the opposite of that. It didn't have a king or nobles, nor did it have any subjects to speak of, but it was a hierarchical society where the pope was the head and its adherents were innumerable. Should the pope declare a holy war, the church's followers would throw away their lives and make for the battlefield. Its congregation was scattered across the continent, so its size and influence were larger than any single country.

This meant that the secret feuds raging within the sect's shadows were that much more intense. No organization could run entirely on good intentions and fair play, not even a religious one, and especially not an organization vast enough to span the entire continent.

If there was a difference between the countries of this world and the Church of Meneos, it was how they decided their next ruler. For example, succession in the Japanese Imperial Family is decided by royal descent, and its bloodline continues uninterrupted even to this day. The British Royal Family is likewise decided by royal descent.

This system is often frowned upon in modern society, but it's not without its advantages. It offers stability, for one. However, there are serious disadvantages as well. Someone completely unqualified could inherit the role, leading to catastrophic results.

Modern Japan doesn't have a noble class, so most people don't encounter this kind of system in their day-to-day lives, but it's not completely absent either. A textbook example is when a child inherits their parents' company. Nepotism can have adverse effects on the company's management, like when that child crushes it against the rocks with their mismanagement. Even if the second generation runs the company successfully, any subsequent descendant could prove to be the black sheep. With each generation, there is risk the founder's efforts will be forgotten, and a privileged successor takes over. It's highly likely that an unfit heir will appear at some point down the line.

On the other hand, many people claim that meritocracy isn't necessarily a flawless alternative. Numerous companies that stuck to meritocratic ideals ended up falling apart. One doesn't have to look too deeply to find the flaws either. Whose efforts ought to be rewarded? One has to remain impartial when appraising other people, and therein lies meritocracy's biggest problem.

Some might say that one needs only to examine the objective facts, but that's easier said than done. People always lean toward subjective judgment. For instance, it's often said that appearances and romantic feelings shouldn't factor into such decision-making, but people will always find others they relate to more on a personal level. Likewise, some people will never be able to get along.

When it comes to dealing with a colleague, that's all well and good, but it becomes an issue when a superior has to appraise their subordinates. People try to remain objective, of course, when evaluating an employee's performance, but one can't always keep their personal impressions and emotions out of the process.

The same holds true for those under evaluation, especially if they are being criticized. If one feels that their superior dislikes them, it becomes very easy to doubt the validity of their criticism. The easy way out is to assume that their superior is treating them unfairly. Even if the appraisal is positive, one might still assume that another superior might have given them an even more glowing review.

The truth is that it's impossible to establish a fair, impartial meritocracy. One could try introducing a third party to handle the appraisals, but not all professions can allow for that kind of observation.

Meritocracy often works against those who perform fairly but averagely in their daily jobs. For example, a police officer's job is to prevent crimes and arrest felons, but they're appraised on how many arrests they make. A police officer can spend their days preventing crimes, only for their work to go unacknowledged. They act as deterrents that nip crimes in the bud, but their effectiveness is hard to express in numbers. There are even cases where the fact that nothing happened makes it seem like they're not doing their job, which quashes their motivation to work.

In the end, both systems have their pros and cons. It boils down to what priorities they wish to stress and what risks they're willing to take.

The Church of Meneos balanced both familial succession and meritocratic ideals. While archbishops and other high-ranking clergy often nominated successors from their family, many people had risen in the church's ranks despite their commoner background. Cardinal Roland was a prime example of that.

Unfortunately, the man sitting before Ricardo would never reach the top of the Church of Meneos. The pope did nominate his successor from among the cardinals, but not every cardinal could take the role. Only those with the blood of the first pope could be nominated, and Jacob Roland was of no relation.

Even so, the Church of Meneos wasn't necessarily bound by the chains of familial succession.

He may never be a pope, but he came from poverty, with no backers to vouch for him, and went from being a simple priest to a grand cardinal.

Becoming the pope of the Church of Meneos wasn't unlike becoming a king. In that sense, a priest who guided the adherents' lives was similar to a lesser noble, and a cardinal—the rank second to the pope—was like a duke. After all, cardinals had the privilege of electing the next pope.

In other words, Ricardo's master, undeterred by his commoner background, had risen to a high status. It was a success story if there ever was one. Getting this far had required extraordinary effort, and there was no telling the amount of blood, sweat, and tears it took for Cardinal Roland to claw his way up.

Yet Cardinal Roland's usual demeanor and attitude carried nothing of the darkness from the effort he expended and the sacrifices he made. He always smiled and treated even the simplest adherents with kindness, even when there was nothing to be earned from it.

Most people in the church would describe Cardinal Roland as a jolly, amicable man. But that very same cardinal was currently silent, his brows furrowed as he viewed the report Ricardo had just handed over.

As Ricardo gazed at his master, he thought back to the last time he saw Sudou, just before Sudou slipped away from them.

I didn't think he would be that elusive.

This was, perhaps, the first real humiliation Ricardo had ever felt. Tracking and following targets was everyday work for him and his men, and never once had they betrayed Cardinal Roland's expectations like this before. They hadn't been careless either, nor had they carelessly underestimated Akitake Sudou. If there were reasons for this blunder, it was that Ricardo had spoken with Sudou several times before while serving the cardinal and that Cardinal Roland had issued his order too suddenly.

Very few people could have complied with his request in the first place, and with no time to prepare, even the most skilled person would have trouble avoiding detection.

In truth, Ricardo failed this time because of one major factor. As the man who operated in the shadows for Cardinal Roland, Ricardo had the responsibility to investigate the topography of the city they'd

be staying in.

The location put me at a disadvantage I couldn't overcome.

Because of that, Sudou had gotten away.

The secret feuds within the Church of Meneos could be intense, and the higher one's status within the church, the worse they became. Everything was possible, from baseless rumors to outright sabotage to assassination. Even Cardinal Roland, who was known as a model figure of good character, had slipped away from an assassin's clutches more than once. He'd also secretly ordered Ricardo to take care of the opposition in the past.

Since Ricardo served such a master, knowing the topography of the city they were in was a matter of life and death for him. An enemy assassin could strike, or they could clash with the local authorities, or a natural disaster like a tornado or an earthquake could strike. There was little chance of any of those happening, but they had to be accounted for nonetheless. But for as rare as those occurrences were, they had actually happened during Ricardo's tenure under Cardinal Roland. Fortunately, Ricardo had slipped away unscathed each time thanks to his quick thinking and preparedness.

So, as a matter of course, Ricardo had familiarized himself with Pireas's layout. He knew of several escape routes in the Mars Pavilion, where Cardinal Roland and the expedition from Menestia were staying, which would provide a quick getaway from the city, and he'd arranged for people who'd be useful in such an escape to be in their service. But even an experienced spy like Ricardo couldn't possibly know every road and alleyway of a foreign city.

If this was the holy city, I could mobilize more people to pursue him, but...

Unlike in the holy city of Menestia, the Church of Meneos's central hub, Ricardo's options were much more limited in the unfamiliar city of Pireas, Rhoadseria's capital. After all, even though the Temple Knights' elites were guarding Cardinal Roland, they weren't actually under his command. The same could be said of Rodney Mackenna and Menea Norberg, who were usually quite pious and loyal.

If the Church of Meneos could be likened to a company, both Rodney and Menea were Cardinal Roland's colleagues, but they had different jobs in different departments. Certainly, they were close enough that Cardinal Roland could come to them for help if need be.

Indeed, Cardinal Roland had asked for Rodney specifically to accompany him because of how much he trusted Rodney. But that didn't make Rodney the cardinal's subordinate, and the cardinal couldn't ask him to handle this kind of dirty work. It was the same for the other knights; they obeyed the Church of Meneos, not Cardinal

Roland in particular.

The only true subordinates Cardinal Roland had on this journey were a dozen or so men, including Ricardo.

All of them are skilled, very much so, but...

The faces of his colleagues flashed in Ricardo's mind. They were as adept at self-defense as people native to this world could be, and since all were charged with guarding Cardinal Roland, there was no doubting their reliability. But this task required some familiarity with martial arts, so that had narrowed the list of viable candidates down to Ricardo and the three people who were waiting in one of the other rooms.

This was by no means enough people to do the job properly, but Ricardo and his subordinates were all experienced, and if their job was to follow some amateur merchant, he was confident they could do it. However, Akitake Sudou was no amateur, and that had made all the difference.

Of course, this was just an excuse. More often than not, Ricardo had to work without the time needed to prepare. In fact, it was Ricardo's job to ensure that his tasks were completed successfully despite the lack of preparation. To do this, Cardinal Roland paid him a very generous wage—much more than a spy would usually receive—and gave him vast authority.

Still, when subordinates were asked to pull off an unreasonable task, they expected their superiors to see to it that their work environment was prepared in order to make their mission a bit easier. However, that was rarely the reality, and in most cases, a superior would simply force the task on their subordinates and ignore the absurdity of their demand. It seemed that not even the Church of Meneos's supposedly noble clergymen, lofty servants of a god, were above that behavior—so long as they weren't men like Cardinal Roland.

Even after Ricardo reported his failure, Cardinal Roland hadn't scolded him. Given the difference in their status, Cardinal Roland could have acted as haughty and domineering as he wished, and no one would have been allowed to fault him for it. Likewise, no matter how absurd the cardinal's orders might be, Ricardo was obligated to comply. For all intents and purposes, the Cardinal had a life-and-death power over him. Be that as it may, Cardinal Roland never abused that kind of authority. He'd had to overcome similar adversity to reach his high status, and he remembered those hardships all too well. For that reason, Ricardo believed the cardinal was a master worth serving.

That's exactly why this failure tastes so bitter...

The cardinal wasn't blaming Ricardo for the outcome, but that didn't make Ricardo feel any less responsible for it. The human heart

worked in mysterious ways, because the fact that he was neither scolded nor punished only made him feel more guilty.

This left Ricardo with just one recourse. Still looking to the floor, Ricardo reached for his own left breast. Feeling the hard object there under his clothes, he steeled his resolve. The item was something he'd carried on his person since the day he swore to become Cardinal Roland's spymaster.

I'd hoped I would never have to use this.

Espionage was a dangerous field by nature, and failure not only cost one their life, but put their master in jeopardy as well. For that reason, Ricardo always kept this dagger on his person so that he'd have the means to repent for his failures.

As that thought crossed Ricardo's mind, Cardinal Roland finally spoke, saying, "First, let me apologize for asking you to handle this job so suddenly. It must have been difficult. I'm truly sorry I had to force this on you."

Ricardo gawked at the cardinal, though he knew how impolite it was. He'd assumed that the cardinal might not scold him, but he hadn't expected the cardinal to outright apologize. Yet Cardinal Roland carried on, seemingly unaware of Ricardo's shock.

"There's no need to try to follow him again either. I know your skill better than anyone. If he could slip away from you despite your best efforts, it just goes to show how exceptionally capable Sudou is. And this isn't Menestia, so there's only so much you can do without drawing attention to yourselves."

Ricardo's shoulders trembled slightly, but he held his tongue despite the rush of emotion. Cardinal Roland had only said the truth, but Ricardo was in no position to affirm his words.

Perhaps sensing Ricardo's feelings, Cardinal Roland sighed and gently smiled at him. "That man could have ended up silencing you instead, so I'm glad that, at the very least, you all returned safely."

"Your Eminence," Ricardo murmured, his throat tightening. Did the cardinal really care so much for the lives of mere spies?



Deep down, Ricardo knew that these words were, at least on some level, lip service. Spies were essentially disposable, but Cardinal Roland's tone was full of respect for Ricardo.

Seeing Ricardo so overwhelmed, Cardinal Roland shrugged and smiled playfully, a gesture that very much suited him.

"That said, we can't very well disregard this. And we can't return to Menestia until we're done with the task the pope entrusted me with," the cardinal explained, the smile vanishing from his lips. "And that's why, Ricardo, I need you to build an intelligence network in Pireas. I'll leave the details up to your discretion."

"If we're going to build an intelligence network in a land we're not familiar with, it will cost a great deal of money," Ricardo replied. "Are you sure you want to go this far?"

The holy city of Menestia was in the continent's southwest region, while Pireas was on the far side in the northeast. Traveling in a straight line, it would take two to three months to get there by foot, but it could end up being longer if one had to detour due to weather or terrain.

The O'lortmea Empire's presence in the center of the continent complicated the journey even more, since the empire had a troubled history with the Church of Meneos. It didn't openly oppose the church, but relations between the two were cold. Likewise, the Kingdom of Helnesgoula to the north was locked in a power struggle with the Holy Qwiltantia Empire, so the church had to abstain from crossing through there too.

Both Helnesgoula and O'lortmea admitted that the church had value, since it was the sole religion in the continent, but they couldn't afford to let it grow any stronger under their noses. After all, the continent didn't have the concept of separating religion from the state. Either way, owing to both the geographical distance and these political circumstances, the church hadn't really spread to the three kingdoms of the east—including Rhoadseria—meaning that it had very limited influence in that area.

So if one had to build an intelligence network in Rhoadseria, there were only two practical options: build it up gradually, bit by bit, or utilize an existing organization. Given the nature of the pope's mission for Cardinal Roland, they couldn't pick the former option. All the same, taking over an existing organization in Rhoadseria, where the church's influence was weak and their military force was limited, would be exceedingly difficult. Besides these two options, the only remaining recourse was to bribe people for information, but the sheer sum required to do so would be a problem.

It's not impossible, but...

Gathering intelligence through bribery wasn't a waste of money, but finding sufficient funds would be tough.

Cardinal Roland calmly nodded. "I understand your concerns, but we need people to gather information, and if it's necessary, you have my permission to use as much money as you need. Don't worry, you can leave the fundraising to me," he appended with a smile.

Ricardo silently hung his head. If his master was willing to go this far to endorse this plan, it wasn't his place as a mere spy to argue, especially after Cardinal Roland, who was known for his political prowess, had volunteered to help procure the needed funds. Ricardo didn't know what connections the cardinal would use to get the required money, but he had no doubt the cardinal would succeed.

"Then I'll begin the preparations right away... Excuse me, Your Eminence."

Ricardo got to his feet, bowed to the cardinal once again, and turned to leave.

"Ricardo. Losing Sudou was a painful blow, so I won't tell you to not let it bother you. However, not many people are more trustworthy than you are when it comes to this, and I intend to make use of your abilities going forward. You understand how I feel, yes?"

Sensing the sincerity in Cardinal Roland's words, Ricardo nodded. "Yes, Your Eminence. I understand."

After bowing his head once again, Ricardo hurried out of the room.

Cardinal Roland watched him leave, then sighed deeply—a gesture he could make only once he was entirely alone.

"Akitake Sudou, eh?"

The moment he said the name, the cardinal's expression warped. Up until just a few hours ago, it was the name of a close friend, close enough that he'd responded to a sudden request for a meeting by clearing his schedule and vacating everyone from his chambers.

But what about now? Now that he's revealed his fangs to me, everything has changed.

Just mouthing Akitake Sudou's name felt unpleasant. Their meeting that night had simply been that shocking.

There were a few reasons as to why Jacob Roland, a man without any backing or connections, had been able to claw his way up the church's ranks to the title of cardinal. He was blessed with the disposition and abilities for it, and luck played a major role too. But had those been the only reasons, he wouldn't have climbed as far as he did.

The faces of children, their expressions clouded with melancholy, filled Cardinal Roland's mind.

Dark faces, bereft of hopes and dreams. Eyes as empty as a void...

That was a distant memory of a time when he ran an orphanage under the Church of Meneos.

Back then, I was nothing more than a lowly priest. Why did I seek to throw my lot in with that man? I knew he must've had some reason to donate that much money at once.

The story went back twenty years. Having risen to the station of cardinal, Roland now knew the darkness of the Church of Meneos all too well. He was aware that it wasn't made up solely of the pious and devoted. Still, most of the western continent saw the clergy as virtuous believers who spread the faith of the god Meneos, creator of the light and chief among the many deities, and the church itself did much to keep up that facade. The orphanage was one such endeavor.

Twenty years ago, Roland had been a man of faith who earnestly tried to accept those orphans and raise them to maturity. Sadly, the orphanage was nothing but a front to deceive the public. The church's higher echelons cared little for the idea of raising poor orphans who'd lost their parents and were left without the means to survive.

This had made running the orphanage incredibly difficult. There was a church built in the area, which meant he didn't have to worry about putting a roof over their heads, but with regard to food and clothes, he could just barely maintain the minimal standards of living for the children. The church provided a monthly budget, but it wasn't nearly enough to feed over a hundred children, and he could hardly afford to buy all of them secondhand clothes. Needless to say, the children didn't have any other clothes to wear. Even Roland, who ran the orphanage, had only a few spare priestly robes in order to keep up appearances, which truly showed how poor they were.

They really did just barely scrape by, always one slipup away from starvation, and what food they did have was by no means nutritious. About once or twice a year, children who grew sick from the cold would die because they couldn't get medicine that would have helped them.

Even so, the orphans in Roland's care were better off than most. Some orphanage owners colluded with slave merchants behind the scenes to sell the children off, seeking to lighten their expenses given their own limited budgets.

At the time, Roland greatly resented the Church of Meneos for doing this philanthropic work only for appearances' sake, without any desire to actually help the children. Perhaps he'd even felt anger and despair. How could clergymen, people of mercy and love, turn a blind eye to the suffering of the weak?

Roland didn't intend to deny all human desire, but he did think that greed, when taken too far, became unsightly and terrible. The clergymen's actions didn't strike him as appropriate for servants of the

God of Light. Yet he was one lowly priest among many, so he couldn't change the way the Church of Meneos worked. Even if he'd tried to convince his colleagues and superiors to change the situation, they'd have just laughed him off. At worst, he could have instead been blamed for criticizing the church's doctrine.

In the end, being in the right wasn't enough on its own. But just as that realization had started settling in, a man had appeared before Jacob Roland without any warning—a man called Akitake Sudou. Sudou's visit had been too sudden, and no sooner had he been shown to the orphanage's modest guest room than he dropped a small leather sack in front of Roland, saying he wanted to make a donation to the orphanage.

The jingling thud of the sack when it hit the table was that of coins, immediately indicating the large sum inside it. The shock Cardinal Roland received when he opened the bag and saw the donation within was so intense that even twenty years later, Roland could remember it vividly. The sack had contained enough gold coins to cover the food expenses of all the children for a month. If they were to buy ingredients in bulk and economize wisely, it even could've been enough to spare all the children from hunger for half a year.

The disparity between the wealthy and the poor in this world was exceedingly large. Some people had to work half a day to earn a loaf of bread that cost a single bronze coin, while others bought heaps of bread with a gold coin.

It seemed obvious that Akitake Sudou was among the wealthy, but even if he was doing this on a whim, the donation was much too generous. It wasn't the kind of money people donated to a passing acquaintance.

Sudou certainly hadn't visited the orphanage out of pure pity. As Roland accepted the generous donation and thanked him from the bottom of his heart, Sudou had smiled as if to tell the cardinal to think nothing of it and signaled to a companion standing behind him. The man then threw five more sacks onto the table.

"Jacob Roland, I understand your and your orphanage's situation. The children here are treated better than most, but they still have to go about in used clothes. They still need to stave off hunger, while the high priests of the church always walk with their stomachs full. Despite being men of faith, the clergy think only of power and how to get more of it."

Sudou's tone had been sympathetic, like he'd been reassuring Roland that he knew Roland was thinking the same things deep down. But notwithstanding his soft tone, Sudou's words were nothing short of scathing criticism for the church.

Since Roland had been bitter about the corruption within the

Church of Meneos, everything Sudou said had been a sound argument. But if anyone in Menestia had heard Sudou, he would've been shot to death. Sudou had said those dangerous words to not only a man he'd just met, but a member of the church and a pious believer, even if he was just a lowly priest.

As Roland regarded him with utter confusion, Sudou had whispered, "What say you? Will you change this unjust reality with your own hands? Assuming you're willing to submerge yourself in the muck..."

At first, Roland hadn't understood what Sudou meant, but as the initial shock wore off, the meaning gradually sank in. Roland knew just how dangerous those words were, and in spite of that, he agreed to Sudou's offer. No matter what the cost might be, he needed to change the way things were. He'd cast aside today if it guaranteed a better tomorrow.

That choice had cost the lives of many. Some of them were people Jacob Roland believed were the cause of the church's corruption. He made many friends on one hand, while creating a great many enemies on the other, and walked along a path drenched with the blood of both.

Even now, I don't believe I made the wrong choice.

In exchange for that large sum of money, Sudou had asked that Roland move up in the ranks of the Church of Meneos—nothing else. Sudou gave him the funds needed to do so as well as knowledge to help him in his endeavors. The intelligence Sudou provided about the relations between the O'ltormea Empire and the Kingdom of Helnesgoula was especially valuable.

But of course, Roland had paid a price for all that help. Sudou had asked Roland for intelligence, which Roland had provided, along with helping him in all manner of ways that made things easier for Sudou. But it was never anything that gave Roland or the Church of Meneos any trouble.

Most of the information Sudou had requested was about the human relations within the church—which factions had power, and who opposed whom. It was difficult for an outsider to acquire these details, but it wasn't exactly top secret intelligence either. True, the church had ended up changing its supplier of rations and equipment to the Martinez Company, which Sudou had recommended, but that was merely a mutually beneficial agreement, and it certainly hadn't hurt the church in any way. The equipment they bought from the Martinez Company was of higher quality, yet they bought it for the same price as the last company they'd worked with. While other companies might have sold equipment of similar quality, they did so for twice the price.

On top of that, whenever the church needed to make a sudden request, the Martinez Company prioritized their orders first. A business often sought profit above all else, but they never took advantage of such occasions to raise their prices. The fact that they'd never prioritized greed had made quite the impression.

In all honesty, the dealings with Sudou had been nothing but profitable for the Church of Meneos, so while Jacob Roland didn't fully trust Sudou, twenty years of successful dealings had assuaged most of his doubts.

And that was careless of me.

What was he to do now?

Akitake Sudou... Do I take his offer or refuse?

Sudou's proposal wasn't bad for Cardinal Roland and the church. It was a windfall, actually.

But the problem is, I can't tell what Sudou's intentions are at all.

Cardinal Roland's task was to look into Ryoma Mikoshiba, a new noble in Rhoadseria, and ascertain his background. Normally, one would assume Ryoma Mikoshiba and Akitake Sudou would be enemies. Given what Sudou had proposed to Cardinal Roland earlier, it was obvious that whatever he had in mind wouldn't be in Ryoma's favor. But that didn't mean that Sudou was necessarily on the church's side either.

No...for all I know, he could be part of the Organization.

Cardinal Roland had harbored that doubt ever since he climbed to his current position and learned of the mysterious group that matched the church in power and scale. Nonetheless, each time that suspicion had surged in his heart, he'd come to the same conclusion. The Organization viewed the Church of Meneos as an enemy, and Sudou's actions seemed to imply the opposite. If nothing else, the things Sudou said and did had never caused any major damage to the church. What suspicion he gave off seemed inconsequential in the face of those outcomes.

If he's part of the Organization, what does this mean about the attack on Count Winzer's estate in Galatia?

It still wasn't clear what the attacker who raided them that night had been after. Count Winzer had called Cardinal Roland to his estate with the intention of showing him some sort of wooden crate, but the cardinal wasn't sure what it all meant.

A "gun." That's what Count Winzer called it, but we were attacked before he could explain how to use it. He did say it was a fearsome weapon, but..

Either way, the attacker had fled with the weapon, so puzzling over it wouldn't do Cardinal Roland any good. Many of the things Sudou did and said were suspicious. All that remained was to weigh

those against the profit he brought Cardinal Roland and the church and come to a decision.

Cardinal Roland already knew the answer to that.

I can't overlook the fact that he knows things he has no business knowing. However...

Only a precious few knew about the personal order the pope had given Cardinal Roland. The fact that someone among them had leaked that information to Sudou was intolerable, but at the same time, there wasn't anything that could be done about it now.

For now, I have to look into Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Cardinal Roland didn't know if Sudou was part of the Organization or where his objectives lay, but he did know one thing: that man, Ryoma Mikoshiba, was about to cause a storm that would embroil all of Rhoadseria, and it would be no ordinary upheaval. If his guess was correct, the chaos to come would be large enough to jeopardize Rhoadseria's very survival. These events could become a bomb that would shake up the power balance of the entire western continent.

If I could, I'd rather return to Menestia right now.

Much to Cardinal Roland's sorrow, he couldn't do that.

"In that case, I don't have enough soldiers. I should send a messenger to the holy city."

Sighing deeply, Cardinal Roland rose from the sofa and settled at his desk by the window. He took out a feather pen and some parchment and began composing his message.

Chapter 1: Tarnished Pride

A rapid six-point thrust, moving faster than the eye could see, flowed into a sideways sweep. The sound of a blade slicing through the cold night air mingled with the huffs of labored breathing.

The moment Menea Norberg saw him perform that technique, she felt a shock run through her entire body. To her, this lethal sequence of attacks was a sight to behold. It was, in a manner of speaking, movement that bordered on art.

Impressive...

The Church of Meneos passed down martial arts techniques that employed all manner of weaponry—swords, spears, and bows—and one had to train in all of them to join the Temple Knights. It was similar to the Eighteen Arms of Wushu, a list of the eighteen weapons used in Chinese martial arts. Of the weapons included, the Temple Knights prioritized the sword. They focused on their swordsmanship, the style of which was known to only the members of the Temple Knights and their opponents who'd crossed blades with them. This in and of itself demonstrated how important the sword was to them.

It makes sense he'd start off with a six-point thrust. How many of the veteran members can even block that move? He followed it up with a thunderstorm flurry—a sideways sweep into a right slash—and he maintained his momentum and finished with an upward sweep. A deadly combination.

Menea didn't know who'd come up with this style of swordplay, but it had been passed down through the Temple Knights for many years. There were ninety-nine forms, and members of the order diligently studied and polished each of them to perfection in battle.

The style itself was already lethal, but what made it truly terrifying was that the different forms could be strung together for a combination attack. That created hundreds upon thousands of variations, and based on the wielder's skill and ingenuity, they could construct many different types of combination attacks.

The Temple Knights believed that mastering this swordplay style was as crucial as mastering martial thaumaturgy, so it had become a fundamental part of the order's identity.

Menea was watching a man practice these techniques. They were in the garden of the Mars Pavilion, the lodging that Cardinal Roland had rented for himself and the church's delegation. The building was

U-shaped, and at its center was the garden, surrounded on three sides by the inn's walls. This layout made it impossible for anyone to enter from the street or even glimpse inside the structure.

The garden's main purpose was to offer guests peace and serenity, and they were free to enter from inside the inn and stroll through it whenever they liked. Guests especially enjoyed having lunch in the gazebo while the noon sun shone overhead. The seasonal flowers and well-maintained lawn made it the picture-perfect place to relax.

Recently, however, fewer and fewer people were frequenting the garden because Rodney Mackenna, a man affiliated with the Temple Knights, had made it his constant hangout. He wasn't intentionally monopolizing it, though. He just needed a spacious area with enough room to train and move about with nothing in the way.



His room was rather large, so he could have trained there, and it would have sufficed because he was mostly focusing on improving his form and increasing his muscle mass. Still, the wide garden was much more ideal than a room full of furniture and fixtures. In particular, he couldn't practice martial thaumaturgy in his room. And since the garden was full of trees and plants, the air quality was much better. Not that it was difficult to breathe in his room, but air quality made all the difference when training.

On top of that, the garden was still within the premises of the Mars Pavilion, meaning it was less likely a stranger would happen upon him training. After all, this was Pireas, Rhoadseria's capital city, and Rodney couldn't afford to accidentally get in trouble with Rhoadseria's knights. Normally, Rodney would talk things out and resolve the matter peacefully if that were to happen, but in his current state of mind, he would certainly cut down whoever argued with him without a second thought.

In that regard, the Mars Pavilion's proprietor shouldn't have allowed Rodney to use the garden, a place of respite, as a training ground. In fact, the proprietor had already sent Cardinal Roland a few complaints, a not-so-subtle hint at just how much this troubled the Mars Pavilion. But the cardinal understood how Rodney was feeling, so he'd simply accepted the complaints without passing them along. Instead, he'd paid the proprietor a large sum for the inconvenience, and the proprietor had agreed to tolerate the situation for now.

Considering what Rodney's doing, it'd be strange if no one complained.

Menea, hiding behind one of the garden's trees, gazed at the ground around Rodney. The soil was disturbed and pocked. Rodney's powerful stomps, reinforced by martial thaumaturgy, crushed the well-maintained lawn and destroyed its orderly shape, and his intense swordplay scattered and swept the seasonal flowers away.

Rodney hadn't intended to ruin the flowers or the lawn, and there was no malice behind his actions, but the proprietor didn't much care whether he'd done it on purpose. When the cardinal and his delegation first arrived at the Mars Pavilion, the proprietor had proudly declared that it had the best garden in the capital and that restoring it to its present glory had taken both a great deal of money and years of work.

But I can understand why Rodney's acting like this.

Menea knew Rodney very well. He was a kindhearted man, even if he was a bit of a spoiled, overgrown boy who lacked common sense. His skills with the blade were top notch, but he could be needlessly earnest and a little blind to human malice. Worst of all, he was a sore loser. He had the strength to keep on fighting, even if his opponent

was much stronger than him...so long as he believed he was in the right.

Because of his disposition, Rodney would have struggled to maintain Count Mackenna's domain, even if he hadn't been driven out of the Kingdom of Tarja. Nobles needed to have pride, but at the same, they needed to know when to make political compromises. That kind of flexibility wasn't in Rodney's nature.

Given how he is, being forced to leave Tarja wasn't all bad.

They resented the fact that they'd had to leave, and looking back on it now still boiled Menea's blood, but things seemed different when viewed from a noble's perspective. Rodney was a worthy warrior, but Menea had to admit—though it pained her to do so—that he would've made a terrible noble. He lacked the skills necessary to make a domain prosper, and he couldn't have assimilated whatsoever into the royal court with its cutthroat politics.

Not every noble house's head has to be a good politician, but considering Rodney's personality...

Neither political savvy nor managerial skills were expected of the house's head. They weren't undesirable qualities, of course, and if one had them, all the better. After all, it was a noble's duty to manage and develop their domain. But lacking those skills didn't disqualify one from being a noble.

Or rather, the head doesn't necessarily need to have those skills himself...

In all likelihood, very few family heads were talented in both politics and military affairs. Most noble houses relied upon the history behind their names and the retainers in service to them. The only trait a family head needed was pedigree, along with the ability to effectively use his retainers. Even if the head was lacking in certain skills, he could always hire dependable subordinates to handle things for him.

Things were rarely that simple, though. If one could just control their subordinates, things could end up resolving nicely, but that sadly wasn't the usual outcome. Sometimes it was the head's fault. They could fail to recognize a skilled subordinate's contributions, or even grow envious of them. It was a contradiction; they would gather the talented to serve under them, but they couldn't stand it when others were more successful than they were. Most people would say that if they were so jealous, they shouldn't have invited them to be their vassals to begin with. Otherwise, it would be more productive to admit their shortcomings and strive to improve themselves. But by their very nature, people sometimes made unreasonable, illogical choices. A noble could accept that they were nothing more than a figurehead ruler, but those under them would eventually lose patience

and rise up in revolt. Whether their attempt succeeded depended on a number of factors.

One could guess at another's potential based on their past achievements, and based on what she'd seen, Menea conceded that Rodney Mackenna wasn't necessarily the right man for the job.

The Rodney I used to know might've been able to function, if only as a puppet ruler, but...

The Rodney now was different from the Rodney she knew. The raid on Count Winzer's estate in Galatia had changed something within him, or perhaps it had brought to the fore some part of him that she had never seen. He hadn't changed much in his day-to-day life, but the shadow that sometimes fell over him was darker than before.

Plus, there was that run-in with the bandits a few days ago...

Menea's well-kept brows furrowed as she recalled what had happened a week or so ago. When they were traveling on the highway to Pireas, a scout had reported that there were sounds of swords clashing in the woods nearby. Rodney and Menea left Cardinal Roland's safety to their comrades and took ten soldiers to follow the scout into the woods.

When they neared the source of the sounds, they found a dozen or so bandits surrounding a band of merchants. Unfortunately, by the time they arrived, the raid had ended and the bandits were preparing to eliminate their victims. The guards protecting the merchants lay collapsed on the ground, no longer able to fight. The guards who still drew breath waited for the bandits to deliver the final blow.

To the bandits, any adventurers or mercenaries guarding the merchants were a problem. The merchants could be held for ransom, but if the bodyguards were to survive, they could report the bandits to the guild or the city patrol. Then the bandits would have a bounty on their heads, and they didn't want skilled mercenaries coming after them. Just one surviving guard would put the bandits' lives at risk, so while finishing off the weak and defenseless was by no means an admirable act, the bandits were merely doing what they had to do.

A few of the merchants were still standing, prepared to fight, but with their guards out of commission, they couldn't possibly escape a dozen bandits surrounding them. The outcome was all but decided.

The five merchants looked around in despair. They were only a few days away from the capital, so they were in a relatively safe area, but despite that, bandits attacked in broad daylight. This could only mean that Rhoadseria was on its deathbed. Still, given the many upheavals the country had faced in the last few years, it didn't come as much of a surprise.

The problem is...

The problem was how Rodney reacted this time. Had he been the same Rodney Menea knew prior to this, he would have cautiously picked a solution that minimized the lives lost. He wouldn't have simply drawn his sword and charged at the enemy. And even if he were to do that, he would have at least considered the merchants' safety. This time, however, he didn't.

The memory of that moment filled Menea with fear toward Rodney.

If I just look at the end results, it might look like he chose the best option he could, but...

Instead of waiting, Rodney had rushed in. He severed the first bandit's head, then used that momentum to diagonally slash into a second bandit behind him. He then thrust his sword, too swift for the human eye to follow, into the heart of a third bandit.

The fact that Rodney had charged the bandits by himself and cut them down wasn't the issue. He was one of the strongest members of the Temple Knights and was proficient with both a sword and martial thaumaturgy. He could have beaten twice the number of bandits just as easily. And had things ended there, everything would have been fine. He'd proved that the arm he lost to the assailant in Galatia had recovered properly; it was terrific news.

But things hadn't ended there. The bandits had all frozen in fear, but then one of them finally came to his senses and pulled a stupefied merchant toward him, holding the merchant hostage. That was when the nightmare began.

Rodney didn't react at all to seeing that...

In a sense, that was true, but it wasn't quite accurate. What he did was cut the bandit down without even flinching.

Rodney cut the bandit...along with the merchant he was using as a meat shield.

That scene was irrevocably etched into Menea's mind. The Rodney Mackenna she knew would never have done that.

Fortunately, Rodney hadn't killed the merchant. He'd pierced his body and the body of the bandit behind him, but he had avoided any spots that would have fatally injured the hostage. The bandit, however, died on the spot.

Rodney's skill was almost godly. To successfully accomplish something like that required a perfect understanding of the human body and precise, unerring accuracy. Naturally, after witnessing that, the remaining bandits had fled. The merchant's injuries were thankfully minor, and he was immediately restored to health thanks to a nostrum Cardinal Roland had given them.

If one considered only the outcome, their small group had stopped a large bandit raid with minimal damages. This was worthy of praise.

Nonetheless, there might have been a better choice, and that doubt weighed heavily on Menea's heart, even days after the fact.

We could've hurried back and asked Cardinal Roland for permission to take his knights. If we'd done that, we could have wiped out the entire bandit group.

That option would have been risky, though. The merchants could have died in the ensuing battle. Some of them would have perished, so in that light, Rodney made the right choice. On the other hand, there was no guarantee that the bandits who got away wouldn't go on to attack other travelers or villages. As cold as it might be, Menea wasn't necessarily comfortable with prioritizing the lives of five merchants over countless future victims.

I'm glad they're alive, of course, but...

The merchants had been as grateful as they could be to Rodney for saving them in their time of need—even the merchant Rodney had stabbed through the stomach. He'd thought his life was already forfeit the instant he was taken hostage. Even if he were to survive that predicament, whatever came next would have certainly been a fate worse than death. Regardless of his methods, Rodney had spared him from that fate, so he didn't blame Rodney for what he did. Also, the other merchants promised they would donate the largest, most expensive gems in their cargo to the Church of Meneos out of gratitude.

That was fine, but Menea still felt unsettled by the whole affair.

It's not what Rodney did in and of itself. It's the fact that he chose to do that.

Menea wasn't sure they'd had any other choice, and the result wasn't as bad as it could have been. In that sense, Menea's anxiety seemed irrational. If she wanted to claim that her anxiety was justified, she would need to come up with a better solution of some kind. But Menea wasn't sure that any other choice would have produced a better outcome, and because of that, her feelings came across as nothing but a whim.

I'm acting like a child throwing a tantrum.

Menea realized that her emotions were unreasonable, but what truly frustrated her was that Rodney Mackenna had changed and was no longer the man she knew. No one could deny that she was right in feeling that way either. The validation of her doubts was right before her eyes, in the form of this decimated garden.

What happened that night is haunting Rodney.

When Rodney lost his arm in the attack on Count Winzer's estate, he had changed. Rodney had tried to hide it from everyone around him, but Menea had been at his side long enough to notice it. The nostrums Cardinal Roland provided had restored his arm, but they did

nothing to heal his wounded heart.

First, Rodney started drinking much more than before. He'd always had a taste for alcohol, and he was a pretty strong drinker at that. He could drink two or three bottles a night, then wake up the next morning without so much as a hangover. But now he was drinking absurd amounts. Whenever he finished his maddened practice sessions, he would drown himself in alcohol, downing nearly ten bottles a night. As far as Menea knew, he did this every single night too. This was a classic example of a man resorting to alcohol as an escape from extreme stress.

In addition, Rodney's appetite greatly decreased, almost in inverse proportion to his increased drinking. He didn't skip meals altogether, but he kept asking the inn's employees to put less food on his plate, using what they served as snacks for his drinking bouts.

Menea felt that all of this cast a shadow over Rodney's personality. Up until now, Rodney was the type to take the initiative among the knights. During feasts and nights out, he would actively participate and liven up the atmosphere.

He was different now. He would still come if invited to drink, but he never looked like he was enjoying himself. He wouldn't participate in conversations, instead emptying his mugs and glasses in silence. He showed up out of duty as a member of the Temple Knights, but he much preferred to spend his free time alone practicing his swordsmanship.

He's shutting himself off from everyone else.

There was only one reason Rodney was acting like this—the shadow hanging over him ever since his arm was severed that night.

As Menea leaned against the tree she was hiding behind, her mind full of these thoughts, the man she was watching suddenly barked, "How long do you plan on hiding there? If you want something, speak already."

Menea peeked out from behind the tree and saw Rodney looking at her with displeasure, his face covered in sweat. He looked like he'd just stepped out of a downpour. His linen blouse clung to his body, and hot steam rose from his skin. His labored breathing echoed in the night.

"I'm sorry," Menea sheepishly replied. "I didn't mean to get in the way of your training, but..."

"I see."

Rodney nodded curtly and turned around.

Rodney was still determined to continue training, but Menea keenly saw the way he staggered for a moment.

How many hours has he been at it?

Menea realized that warriors, by nature, pursued strength.

Strength was the sum of one's talent and effort, and as such, every second one trained was time being well spent, not time being wasted. But everything had its limits, and training wasn't just about blindly waving a sword. Rodney was needlessly and recklessly forcing himself to train past his limits. At this point, it wasn't even training anymore; it was punishment, perhaps even suicide. Rodney had to have realized this, yet he was still bent on swinging his sword more.

Watching his back, Menea timidly uttered, "Count Winzer's death wasn't your fault, Rodney..."

Rodney stopped in his tracks. Her words poked at a wound that still ached, and Menea knew it. But now that she'd said it, there was no taking it back, so she continued to put her feelings into words.

"Rodney, let me say it one more time... You did your duty that night. Cardinal Roland acknowledges that. No one is blaming you, so stop tormenting yourself."



Rodney shivered in anger. "What do you even know?" he said with a low, dark voice. His tone was a hodgepodge of hatred, ire, and regret.

Nevertheless, Menea didn't step down. Her restrained anger seeped into her words as she asked, "Are you that frustrated that you didn't get killed back there too? Do you seriously think you should've died back at Count Winzer's estate?"

Rodney said nothing, but his silence said everything.

"I see... So you think that man took pity on you?"

A clattering sound echoed in the garden. Rodney's right hand, which was gripping his sword, started shaking. Menea was correct; the fact that the assailant had spared his life that night was the greatest insult a warrior like him could have received. If the assailant had just defeated him, Rodney would've been able to come to terms with that. So long as he put forth his best effort, even dying at the hands of a foe was an acceptable fate. Actually, he would have welcomed it as an honor. But nearly dying, just to cling to life by the mercy of his enemy... That smeared mud over his pride and honor. It made all that he'd built in his life so far collapse like a house of cards.

To a warrior like Rodney, this was a fate worse than death, and it would haunt him for as long as he lived. Spending the rest of his days with this defeat festering in his heart would make his life a living hell. And there was only one way to escape that fate.

Rodney started to walk off again, then, with his back still turned to Menea, he whispered, "I *will* kill him. I swear it. No matter what I have to sacrifice to do it..."

His words sounded like they'd risen up from the bottom of the earth, laced with sheer hatred and desire for revenge.

Menea sighed as she watched Rodney walk back to the inn. Her expression was a mix of regret and relief.

He went back to the inn for the night.

Rodney's current state was bloodcurdling. If she'd left him alone, Rodney would have undoubtedly spent the whole night training, so the fact that she'd successfully stopped him from doing that was fortunate. All the same, it was merely delaying the issue.

The problem is the identity of Count Winzer's attacker. We haven't told Asuka about it yet, but it's probably...

That night at Count Winzer's estate, Menea had given Rodney first aid as he lay bleeding on the floor. That moment was burned into her heart, never to be forgotten. The cut on his arm was shockingly clean, implying that the one who'd severed it was unusually skilled. But it was more than just that. The sword that cut him had to have been exceptional too, among the keenest Menea had ever seen. One could

search the western continent up and down and struggle to find swords that sharp.

Menea had seen another equally as clean...on the corpse of a Third-Eye, a tiger monster she saw when she rescued an otherworlder girl who'd just been summoned from Rearth. The meaning behind that was clear.

Asuka was definitely inside the inn at the time. So it's possible...

Perhaps an unrelated third party happened to have a sword just as sharp as hers, but the chances of that were close to nil. The more likely possibility was that it was Asuka's relative, Koichiro Mikoshiba.

But if it is him, it raises another question...

As far as Menea knew, she had done no harm to Asuka Kiryuu. When Asuka was summoned to this world by the Kingdom of Beldzevia, she'd been overwhelmed by everything and hadn't known anything. Menea had offered her shelter and guidance, and Asuka had been grateful for it. Asuka had no reason to begrudge them.

Maybe this was why he spared Rodney...

Still, severing his arm was a violent act. No person would do that to someone they were grateful toward.

And we still don't know who attacked my side either. It's easy to assume they're from the Organization, but...

While Rodney was fighting the assailant, Menea had also engaged a warrior. The warrior had injured her, but she was fortunate enough to escape and reach Rodney in time. However, if her battle with that figure had continued any further, she would have been severely injured. Like Rodney, Menea was one of the Temple Knights' elites, so her attacker had to have been skilled. In fact, given the ferocity of her opponent, Menea was lucky she'd survived that battle with just injuries. Such a warrior could have very well killed her.

I did injure my opponent too, but had the estate's guards not hurried over when they did...

That was an honest account of that battle, though it greatly frustrated her. Yet facts were facts, and someone that skilled couldn't have been some independent, unaffiliated figure. They had to have belonged to some country or group, and the most likely candidate was the secret society manipulating the western continent from the shadows. But if that were the case, it would imply that the Organization's power was a match for the Church of Meneos.

And even worse...

Rodney and Menea held a grudge against the Organization for its involvement in driving them out of Tarja, so that theory would be devastating if true.

And if the attacker really was Koichiro Mikoshiba, and I'm right in assuming he's a member of the Organization, why wouldn't he try to take

Asuka back from us?

If the Organization had a warrior that powerful on their side, surely they could have found plenty of ways to steal Asuka away from them. But the figure she suspected to be Koichiro had never once attempted to make contact with Asuka.

In the end, everything is still a mystery to me. But more importantly, right now...

Heaping theory upon theory wouldn't bring her any closer to the conclusion. There was something else she needed to focus on now.

Ryoma Mikoshiba...a man with the same last name as Koichiro.

That couldn't be a coincidence, but there was no one who could resolve her doubts.

Menea turned her gaze upward, as if seeking the answer to her questions in the northeastern sky.

Chapter 2: A Captive Warrior

A cold northern wind blew across the plains, shrieking and howling as if it were a forewarning of the Kingdom of Rhoadseria's impending doom. The moon shone from a crack in the thick nighttime clouds and cast its rays down upon the ramparts of the citadel city of Epirus.

"What a crappy night," Robert Bertrand whispered as he gazed out of his room's barred window. Glaring back at him from the other side was a bloodred moon—a bad omen. He closed the drapes and sighed.

The familiar white orb dipped in crimson naturally unnerved people, especially a born warrior like Robert. Warriors were willing to forfeit their lives in battle, but at the same time, they were often superstitious. Plus, Robert was being held prisoner in this room—a bird in a gilded cage, as it were—which contributed to the night's lousiness.

"What's going on outside, though? Baron Mikoshiba apparently won the war, but..."

Robert picked up a bottle of brandy sitting on his desk and took a swig before sinking into the sofa. The drink's rich flavor filled his mouth, and before long, he felt the fire of strong liquor surge through his body. The brandy was a handpicked gift from Count Salzberg. The quality was such that it even satisfied Robert, whose tastes were more refined than most nobles'. Bottles like this one cost at least a gold coin, usually more.

Robert then picked up a lump of cheese from the table and tossed it into his mouth. It was fermented from well-bred goat's milk and had a thick, rich flavor. He washed it down with another gulp of brandy.

"Even in this situation, I can't get enough of this taste. Maybe being held prisoner isn't all bad..."

Robert's father was the head of the Bertrand barony. The barony had been a part of the ten houses of the north for generations, but though House Bertrand, a warrior house, had helped House Salzberg secure the north, they were by no means wealthy. If they'd had any valuable mineral deposits or trade ports, things might have been different, but the barony's main industries were farming and husbandry. Since it was near the Xaroodian border, it also dabbled in forestry, but only enough to satisfy the territory's internal needs.

Because the barony had little money or industry, its commoners just barely made a living. The governor, Baron Bertrand, had a considerable fortune, since he was a noble, but it was still fairly small for his title. He didn't claw and scrape for his meals like the commoners did, but he didn't have the money for luxuries.

Of course, if the baron were to tax his subjects without regard for what they could pay, he could live a life of luxury...but it wouldn't last for long. Everything would fall apart within a few years, at most. And if the taxation was severe enough, the barony would collapse even faster than that.

Anyone foolish enough to try that wouldn't hold their title for long. Nevertheless, there were still fools who failed to understand this. And if they were born into a position of power, no matter if they were the first son and heir of a noble family, they would die of some unfortunate "accident" or "illness" before they could inherit the title.

For this reason, Baron Bertrand led a life of frugal simplicity, but it did conflict with his aristocratic dignity. Perhaps it was petty and pretentious, but an aristocrat couldn't just disregard their pride when maintaining order. If the head or heir were spotted in rags, other nobles would mock them, and they'd lose the respect of their retainers and subjects. Aristocrats *needed* to buy luxurious clothes, change their wardrobes yearly, and procure the finest food in case of a dinner party.

Robert wasn't House Bertrand's heir, though. While it was nice that he didn't have to shoulder that responsibility, he came last when Baron Bertrand allotted money for necessities. Robert was only a spare son, kept around in case something happened to the eldest, so his father neglected him until he needed Robert for something.

Robert couldn't hope to be treated the same as the eldest son, especially since his family wasn't wealthy. And should his brother inherit the title and have his own heir, Robert would no longer be needed as a spare. His usefulness would run out, and he'd become nothing but a burden. In fact, his family might even see him as a danger to the family line, making him not a burden but a potential time bomb.

Still, the fact remained that the family needed a spare in case something happened to the eldest. It was absurd and selfish, but that was what it meant to inherit a noble title. Unfortunately, many spare heirs who never inherited the headship met tragic fates. Some of them were allowed to form branch families so they could marry into other households, but that kind of luck was limited. Most of them ended up spending their entire lives as subordinates to their more successful brothers. The family relied on them when needed, but mostly they were reduced to mere vassals. In other words, their family kept using

them until they died.

Robert, however, could rely on his incredible martial prowess, and he'd been lucky enough to meet Count Salzberg, who'd prized his talents and displayed care for him at every turn. Certainly, Count Salzberg had had his own reasons for doing so, but as a result, Robert had developed a discerning taste despite his lowly status.

Even with his sophisticated palate, Robert was perfectly satisfied with his current situation.

It's all you can eat and all you can drink, and if I ask, they'll get me any book I want from the castle library. So long as I ignore the fact that I have no idea what's going on outside this room, this is paradise. Question is, why are they treating the general of a defeated army this well?

Robert had spent over a month detained in this room, which had been prepared to keep him confined within Epirus's castle. The room was as large as a high-class hotel suite, and while its fixtures were plain, it did have an attached bathroom. The bed was soft, and the sheets were cleaned and changed daily. The castle's cooks personally made his meals. And he received clean clothes and undergarments every day.

All of his needs were being met. Compared to his life in the Bertrand barony, this was a step up. His sole complaint was that instead of young maids, knights in full armor, no doubt stationed there to prevent any escape attempts, took care of him. Other than that, they were treating him quite well.

I can think of a few reasons they're being so nice to me...

Robert took another swig of brandy and closed his eyes. He understood the situation he was in, and he knew they were most likely holding him as a bargaining chip or demanding a ransom for his release. Sadly, Robert's family thought of him as worthless baggage. He was perhaps not as hated by his family as his best friend Signus Galveria, but his family still scorned him. In particular, Robert's nature put him at odds with his older brother. His brother tried to mask it, but Robert, with his animalistic intuition, could easily sense the hatred sizzling beneath the surface.

Though we both came out of the same belly...

As far as Robert knew, he and his brother shared the same mother, yet her attitude toward Robert was horrible. She had a certain darkness unique to nobility, and it couldn't be verified in a world without DNA testing. Either way, his mother and brother saw him as a potential obstacle to the firstborn's success.

If Ryoma Mikoshiba was planning to demand a ransom for Robert's release, the chance that his family would agree was close to nil.

They wouldn't pay a single bronze for my release, Robert thought,

snickering with scorn as he imagined his family's shameless faces.
Then again, maybe he didn't know my family situation.

Robert had a feeling that a man who could concoct such meticulous schemes wouldn't let something like that slip past him. After all, Ryoma had been able to convince Signus, who was much more rational and dutiful than Robert was, to turn to his side.

Which just leaves...

As Robert came to that conclusion, someone knocked on the door.

"Come in. I don't mind," Robert said. The door silently opened, and when Robert saw who was behind it, he slowly got to his feet.

In the doorway stood his friend, looking emaciated and tired. Robert smiled sardonically. Signus had betrayed him—there was no mistaking that—but the fact that the traitor looked so much more haggard than the betrayed was a little ironic.

It probably took a lot of courage to make that choice, but the more time passes, the more guilty he feels about what he did. He's a man before he's a warrior.

Seeing his friend like this, Robert felt not anger but pity. Given Signus's situation, Robert couldn't bring himself to condemn Signus's actions.

"Hey, Signus," Robert said. "What's wrong? You look more depressed than usual. Well, either way, take a seat. Got some good stuff here. Care for a drink?" Robert grabbed the bottle of brandy and dangled it in front of Signus.

Considering what had happened the last time they met, Robert's question could have sounded sarcastic, but his tone of voice implied that nothing had happened between them. Robert had seen how his friend's face twisted in regret and agony, so he'd spoken from the heart.

Signus smiled weakly and nodded. "Y-Yeah... I'd love some."

Signus was acting more timid and hesitant than Robert had ever seen him.

He would use any tactic in battle, no matter how vile...but here he is now, tormenting himself.

To triumph in war, one must not only win with strength, but with intelligence as well. Tricking and luring opponents into traps was a common tactic, and anyone stuck on the notion that lies and deceit were immoral wouldn't survive long in a war.

Experienced warriors like Robert and Signus knew this. They might have been powerful fighters, but they were by no means mindless brutes who earned their victories through strength alone. To them, lying wasn't all that deplorable. Yet Signus was standing before Robert as if he were a sinner awaiting judgment.

He's like this now, but on the battlefield, he's clear and to the point.

Really, he's an idiot.

That foolishness was one of the reasons Robert called Signus a friend.

Robert sighed. Signus was standing by the door, looking too ashamed to step inside. Robert had already guessed why Signus had betrayed him. It came down to the fact that Signus was sincere, devoted, and trustworthy. Robert, opportunistic and greedy when it came to satisfying his desires, couldn't hold a candle to Signus. If someone had asked Count Salzberg who he was least wary of among his forces, he would have no doubt named Signus Galveria. Therefore, if Signus chose to betray him regardless, he must have had a good reason.

"So, how long are you gonna stand there?" Robert asked. "Come on in and take a seat."

Signus finally steeled his nerves and stepped into the room.

Signus was earnest and dependable. These weren't negative qualities, but they weren't always good ones either. Depending on the situation, sincerity and duty could become shackles. In this war-torn world where even blood relatives tried to kill one another, these traits only brought pain to those who had them.

Robert downed a swig and thrust the brandy bottle at Signus. "Go on, drink."



Drinking straight from the bottle like brutish bandits or mercenaries wasn't acceptable behavior among the nobility, but this casual conduct was natural to Robert and Signus.

"What's wrong? Don't tell me you don't drink unless it's in a fancy glass now?" Robert said with a smirk.

Seeing that Robert was acting like nothing had changed, Signus finally accepted the bottle, then gulped down the remaining contents—about two-thirds a bottle—as if he was trying to shake something off. Amber-colored droplets spilled from his lips and onto his chest.

"Phew..." Signus roughly wiped his mouth with his hand.

That was no way to enjoy a drink. Signus hadn't taken the time to appreciate the scent of the alcohol, to savor the rich flavor in his mouth, or to admire the color created by years of fermentation. He'd simply gulped it down like a drunkard. Not even the most refined, masterfully brewed alcohol would be good when consumed like this.

Signus wasn't in a state of mind to appreciate the drink. He slowly sat down on the couch and stared at Robert. His eyes looked like they were seeking something, perhaps begging Robert to administer punishment.

Their gazes met, but Robert said nothing, and a heavy silence settled over the room.

Eventually, Signus hung his head and said, "Why are you so quiet, Robert? Aren't you going to blame me?"

Signus had come here deliberately and of his own volition, all the while knowing that Robert would likely cuss at him or even kill him. He had done what he had to in order to protect the one relative he cherished and to freely race along the battlefield, and he didn't regret it, but he wasn't going to use it as an excuse to justify his actions. He'd resolved to take responsibility.

However, the fact remained that Signus had betrayed his friend, although it was harder than he'd imagined. Normally, he would have visited Robert as soon as the war ended, but Signus couldn't bring himself to do so until today. He'd been too afraid and too hesitant. Yet, contrary to his expectations, Robert was treating him as he always did.

Robert remained silent as he took a swig from another bottle. "Blame you, eh?" he asked, his tone both tired and self-deprecating.

Signus hung his head and spat out the words digging into his heart like splinters. "Yes. What I did to you and Count Salzberg was..."

"Yeah. It was betrayal," Robert finished, sighing. "No doubt about that." He then shrugged and said, "I'm not gonna hold it against ya, though."

"What?" Signus raised his head. His features were awash with

shock. “What do you mean?!”

Robert smiled and asked, “Is Elmada safe?”

Signus’s expression immediately hardened. Elmada was a woman already in her midfifties. She wasn’t particularly attractive, but she wasn’t ugly. She had been charming in her youth, but now she was a typical middle-aged lady.

She resided in a small corner of the city where the House Galveria’s estate was located. The townsfolk viewed her as friendly and sociable, but her good character and the fact that she’d once worked as a maid at the Galveria estate were the only remarkable things about her. Otherwise, she was just a plain commoner woman, as ordinary as any in this world. Nevertheless, she meant the world to Signus, so much so that he would upend his entire life for her sake.

“How... How do you know about that?” Signus asked.

Robert shook his head as if he couldn’t believe that Signus would ask that.

“Are you stupid? How many years have we known each other? Not many things would make you turn your back on Count Salzberg. Besides, Mikoshiba’s army was sacking the ten houses’ territories. I thought he did it to concentrate all the refugees in Epirus and increase ration expenses, but he could’ve easily taken Elmada prisoner in the process. That’s what happened, right?”

Robert took another swig of brandy. Signus never was the kind to chase glory and wealth. That wasn’t to say he was some kind of saint with no desires, but he certainly wasn’t greedy enough to betray another for those things. Money, women, power, fame—these temptations had led many men astray, but Signus’s ironclad discipline prevented him from falling prey to them. Elmada was his sole weakness.

“I should’ve realized what Baron Mikoshiba was planning back then,” Robert murmured.

Signus understood Robert’s meaning at once. “Back then...after we finished the first battle. He did seem to pull back his offensive momentum somewhat...”

At the time, both Robert and Signus had felt that something about the way that Ryoma’s army moved after that battle was wrong. Something had been slightly off, in a way only those who’d fought on the front lines could tell.

Robert shrugged. “In the end, we were exploitable pawns. I doubt we could’ve stopped his plan even if we had realized it.”

“Robert...” Signus murmured, surprised to see his friend like this.

If they had been in command instead of Count Salzberg, would the war’s outcome have been different? Actually, they didn’t even need that to win. If those around them had merely understood the two

of them better, things would have turned out differently. They'd seen the trap set before them, but they hadn't been in a position to stop their side from walking right into it. Could anything be more absurd?

When one wasn't in the position to make the decisions, it could result in such absurdities. No matter how sound or correct one's words might be, they were meaningless if no one listened to them.

"But enough of that," Robert said. "Nothing we can do about it now. So, how's Elmada?"

"She's here in this castle," Signus said, smiling wryly.

"Did they bring her here as a hostage?"

Robert didn't even need to ask at this point. Elmada was the chain that kept the wild beast Signus Galveria shackled. By imprisoning her, the Galveria barony had held Signus in check for all these years. Still, Signus's answer defied all of Robert's expectations.

"No. She works here as a maid...by her own request, apparently."

Robert raised an eyebrow. "Oh. How about that..."

It was obvious what Elmada was thinking.

Elmada must be expecting a great deal...

Having never married, Elmada had thought of Signus as her child ever since he was a suckling baby. They weren't related by blood, but for all intents and purposes, they were mother and son. To Signus, whose own blood relations hated and rejected him, Elmada was his sole ally in this world, with the exception of his now deceased grandfather. And now, Elmada was serving the Mikoshiba barony, of her own free will.

She acknowledged Ryoma as Signus's master, and by serving him, she removed any needless uncertainty from Signus's heart. She always was a daring woman, that lady.

Elmada strongly resented House Galveria. The first son was a gutless fool, and the legal wife and her cronies were arrogant spendthrifts whose only value was their pedigree. The current head didn't think any of this was a problem either. Elmada had never made her feelings known, but Robert could tell that she believed that Signus was the worthy heir to House Galveria.

And of course she would.

This was about another family's succession, so neither Robert nor Elmada could speak of it openly, but any neutral third party would come to the same conclusion. Robert did as well, even if he put aside his personal feelings as a friend.

Signus's valor was unmatched in all of Rhoadseria, and when he wielded his favored iron staff, he was unbeatable. On top of that, he was good at keeping morale up, which made him indispensable. Had he gone to the capital and enlisted in the royal guard, he would have surely distinguished himself before long. If just given the chance, he

could possibly become General Helena Steiner's successor.

A man of his caliber had languished in the northern borderlands for so long because his own family despised and oppressed him. House Galveria had exploited him, his achievements earning him no accolades or rewards. To Signus's mother, this was the most frustrating outcome possible. The fact that her existence was a factor in Signus's current fate only made her feel worse.

And then this war came along. Elmada must have seen this as a golden opportunity.

She wasn't just a hostage of House Mikoshiba. By serving as a maid, she actively displayed her support and consent, using her own value to influence the situation. She wouldn't have successfully done this that quickly unless she knew the position Signus would be in. Elmada had one goal in mind: to sever all the fetters shackling Signus Galveria.

She's giving Signus the freedom to fly. And considering Baron Mikoshiba's position, he stood to profit from this idea as well. If nothing else, it gave him a way to ensure Signus's loyalty.

Robert wasn't sure what Ryoma Mikoshiba's endgame was. Was he going to take his troops and shut himself off in the Wortenia Peninsula? Or was he going to completely dismantle the ten houses of the north and take control of their territories? Whichever it was, one thing was clear: Baron Mikoshiba was trying to recruit people to his side.

Nothing else could explain the way he's treating me...

This also explained why Ryoma wasn't as cautious toward Signus. Ryoma was still monitoring him, but Signus was much better off now compared to the harassment and extortion his family had put him through. And without foolish allies constantly holding him back, Signus would be free to prove his full strength.

She put her life on the line to open a path for her child. I envy you, Signus.

Robert closed his eyes and sighed heavily.

Signus looked at him dubiously. "Robert?"

"You know...you've got a good mother," he told his friend, praising him for a treasure he could never have. "But forget that. So, why did you come here? I'm guessing it's not to tell me about Elmada."

"Robert... You know why, right?"

"Of course I know, idiot," Robert said with a smirk. "Why else would they treat a commander from a defeated army so nicely unless they had some kind of angle?"

Signus's expression contorted.

"Why're you making that face?" Robert asked him. "What, did you

think I'm that stupid?"

"Well, it is you... I can't say I didn't consider it."

Robert glared at him. "And we've been friends for how long? You're breaking my heart here, Signus."

They stared at each other for one long moment and then burst into booming laughter. They laughed until the smile left Signus's lips and he turned back to Robert.

"Jokes aside...since you've figured out that much, I'll cut to the chase. The chief wants you to lend him your strength. Join up with him, Robert. A warrior like you shouldn't rot in this frontier hellhole. Is this where you want to die, here on the northern border? Or do you want to put your mettle to the test? Won't you cast away all those stupid bonds so you can be free to sprint across the battlefield with me again?"

Signus, who was usually collected and calm, was passionately expressing his sincerest thoughts. He'd kept the words bottled up until now—not even sharing them with Robert—for fear of others learning his genuine desires.

Robert was hearing Signus put his feelings into words for the first time, but only one thing drew his attention.

Robert's eyes glinted dangerously. "The 'chief,' eh?" he growled.

"Yeah. The chief," Signus repeated. He said it with respect and reverence, and though it was just a title, it showed how serious he was.

I can't believe he got into Signus's good graces this quickly.

Friendship and respect were usually proportional to the amount of time spent together. Most people could hide their true feelings, fake a smile, and work toward a common goal even with people they barely knew. That was just surface level deference, though. One needed to spend years building a relationship in order to acquire genuine trust and respect.

Neither Robert nor Signus let their emotions show on their faces, at least not visibly. Signus came across as much more sociable and friendly than Robert did because of his outward appearance, his attitude, and his tone of speech. Most people would mistakenly assume that Signus was much more straitlaced and obedient, and Signus tried to give off that impression to mask his real emotions. His family did not want him, and they treated him worse than a concubine's child, so he couldn't afford to show any ambition or displeasure. Doing so would cost him his life.

The only ones who knew what Signus truly wanted were Elmada, his wet nurse and substitute mother, and Robert, his sworn friend. Signus had never shared those thoughts with Count Salzburg, who relied on him so much. In truth, he'd never even openly spoken of

them with Robert.

Seeing the smile on Signus's face now, Robert couldn't help but envy Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Not that I don't understand how Signus feels...

Signus was finally free. He felt liberated, and that emotion brightened his once-dull heart.

Robert suddenly realized something. "I see. So you're—"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm now the heir to House Galveria."

Signus's lips curled into a smile. He raised the bottle and brought it to his mouth.

The child of a commoner woman—not even a mistress—had surpassed the child of the baron's legal wife to become the heir.

So the day has come, thought Robert. Signus, hated by his father and rejected by his mother, the bastard son who everyone always looked down on, has inherited House Galveria. Unbelievable.

This world's nobility prioritized legitimate pedigree over personal ability, so someone such as Signus inheriting a title was unthinkable. In fact, there was only one way it could have happened.

Is this what Ryoma wanted from Signus? Did Signus resent his own father and family enough to kill them? Or did Elmada make the move?

A noble house's order of succession was rigidly regulated, but there were ways to move up the line. Signus couldn't inherit the title of Baron Galveria because there were other potential heirs with a stronger claim than him, but if those heirs were removed from the equation, Signus could become the next baron.

Robert didn't think his friend was capable of doing that.

He hated the idea of the headship. Hell, he hated his own family name, but now he's desperate enough to go that far to claim it? To kill his own flesh and blood for it?

The answer to that question could very well destroy the yearslong friendship between Robert and Signus. Robert could forgive Signus for poisoning his drink, but not for this. Their relationship was akin to the inseparable friendships of Chinese tradition, where men trusted their sworn friends so much that they would sever their own head to prove it.

But I'm not going to be friends with human waste.

The way that Signus's family treated Signus was appalling. If Signus were to say that he slew them because his anger had erupted, Robert would cheer him on and praise him for holding back as long as he did. But Robert wouldn't stand by a man who stooped so low as to become a kinslayer in the name of greed and profit. The outcome might be the same, but the motivation was all too different.

"Did you do it? Or was it Elmada?" Robert asked.

Signus simply shook his head. He wasn't dodging the question,

nor was he avoiding the criticism that would come from the answer. Rather, his silence signified that neither he nor Elmada were involved with the circumstances that led to him inheriting House Galveria.

“No, we only found out about it after the deed was done,” Signus answered.

“What do you mean?” Robert asked suspiciously. If Signus was speaking the truth, then who had killed his family?

Signus took another swig from the bottle and smiled wryly.

“It was on the chief’s orders,” he said.

“Baron Mikoshiba ordered it?”

Signus nodded. “When the war ended and I met the chief for the first time, he told me in no uncertain terms that no one in the Galveria line was left alive but me, so if I were to refuse to inherit the title, House Galveria would be wiped out.”

Robert stared at Signus, his eyes wide with disbelief. To a citizen of Rhoadseria, that was utterly preposterous.

“That’s insane...” Robert murmured.

Wiping out an enemy clan was easier said than done, especially if there weren’t any major issues with how they governed their territory and their subjects weren’t discontent with them. But though taking down the enemy’s castle and occupying their territory were similar undertakings deeply connected to each other, they were fundamentally different.

To take over a territory, one must get the fiefdom’s population to accept the new ruler. Force and terror were effective tools for ensuring control, but relying on them alone would result in an eventual rebellion. Even if one ruled with just intimidation, they would need to keep the people’s anger and unrest in check. For this reason, in most cases, a war’s victor left their opponent alive to manage the land for them.

On top of that, Rhoadseria’s nobles had married others of nobility for many years. They did recognize the dangers of inbreeding and kept it to distant relatives, but even then, they only married nobles, so marriage candidates were limited.

If one were to look several generations back, they would find that most noble families were related in one way or another. All the kingdom’s aristocrats were entwined, so even if a Rhoadserian noble went to war with another over territory, it wouldn’t put either family in fatal danger. This was true for political disputes within the sovereign’s court as well. In that regard, Duke Gelhart wiping out Marquis Ernest’s line and killing most of its members years ago was an unusual exception.

I did hear that the Galveria barony’s internal affairs were a mess, but still...

Had Robert been in Ryoma's shoes, he would not have wiped out the opposing house. He wouldn't have been able to bring himself to do it because he too had been born into the aristocracy. Ryoma, however, was detached from such notions.

"So...everyone else but you?" Robert asked.

Signus answered with silence. It expressed all there was to say.

"That right? Then I imagine my family has gone through the same..."

Even Robert could see that his father, Count Bertrand, was a mediocre man. He might have survived this purge, depending on how he'd conducted himself, but Robert knew his father well enough to know that wouldn't be the case.

My father is a typical Rhoadserian noble, through and through.

Count Bertrand wasn't a completely useless governor—he had his uses—but he would be opposed to Ryoma Mikoshiba, who was both an upstart and equal to him in rank, acting like his superior. Robert had heard his father insult Ryoma before, so it was unlikely he'd accept Ryoma as his new liege. No, even if he did, Ryoma probably wouldn't accept his fealty.

He'd just pretend to obey and look for a chance to stab Ryoma in the back.

Of course, if Baron Bertrand had any aptitude as a ruler, Ryoma would welcome him to the fold as a vassal, but that talent would have to be something that overwhelmed others. Robert didn't think that his father had any such qualities.

Sadly, Robert's brother was the same. Their territory was peaceful, and that bought his brother the people's respect, but that was only because Robert exterminated bandits for him. None of his brother's achievements were truly his own.

Signus nodded, affirming Robert's suspicion. "Yes, the chief is aware of everything, from each region's topography to each village's production. He even knows how each house handles taxation. He sees every single issue and problem, including you and House Bertrand."

Signus's words hinted that everything was already over and done with. It cleared up a doubt that Robert had harbored since the war ended.

"I see. He really was thoroughly prepared, wasn't he?" Robert said.

"That's right," Signus replied, smiling.

No matter how large the Wortenia Peninsula was, Ryoma had just recently been made governor, and his territory still had no taxpaying subjects to speak of. The only residents were pirates, demi-humans, and monsters. Since nobles lived off of their population's tax revenue, governing the peninsula should have been a hellish endeavor.

The houses of the north, on the other hand, were relatively wealthy. They didn't have Heraklion's vast wheat fields, but their land was bountiful enough. Ryoma Mikoshiba couldn't compare with noble houses who'd governed their lands for many years. It wasn't even like comparing an adult to a child; it was closer to comparing a grown man to a baby. Most everyone, including Count Salzberg, had been under that impression.

This is more than just being good at fighting, or skilled at managing a domain... Robert thought as a shiver ran down his spine.

Ryoma Mikoshiba did have those talents, but something more important had led him to victory.

"He sent spies to thoroughly investigate the ten houses," Robert muttered. "How long has he been doing that? When did he start planning this war?"

It had only been a few years since Ryoma became a baron and arrived at the peninsula. Soon after that, he'd been dispatched to stop O'tormea's invasion of Xarooda. Logically, he couldn't have started his preparations until after he returned from Xarooda, but that would've only given him half a year to pull it off. Investigating the ten houses so exhaustively in just six months would have been terribly difficult.

"I think he started soon after he took control of the Wortenia Peninsula," Signus stated.

"You think so too, Signus?" Robert asked.

"I'm not sure, but...probably. It just doesn't add up otherwise. But if that's true, it means that ever since he received his title..."

Robert understood the implications behind Signus's words and gulped.

What a fascinating man...

Ryoma was just a baron, the lowest-ranking noble title, but his eyes were always fixed on the peak.

Something hot in Robert's breast began to stir when he realized the extent of Ryoma's ambition.

Signus seemed to have noticed how Robert was feeling, because he repeated his question from earlier. "Let me ask you one more time, then. What are you going to do, Robert? Won't you sprint across the battlefield with me again?"

Robert exhaled and looked at Signus. "Well, it depends on his terms, I guess."

Signus's eyes widened with surprise. He hadn't expected Robert to accept the offer that easily.

I can't believe it. Is he serious? Signus thought. He doubted his ears.

Robert simply watched him, exasperated. "Hey, you were the one who told me to serve him. Why are you so shocked I'm saying yes?"

“I mean, I just didn’t think you’d agree to join his service,” Signus explained.

“Life here has been good,” Robert said, dangling the bottle in front of his friend’s face. “I get to drink fine booze whenever I want, the kind I can’t get back home. They feed me well, give me good clothes, and let me bathe whenever. If I want something to read, they fetch me books from Count Salzberg’s archive. Only downsides to being here are that I don’t have any women to bang and that I’m under lock and key, but other than that, I’m doing fine in here. There is one thing, though. My body feels like it’s getting rusty. You follow? About time I took a breath of fresh air. So if that man’s willing to accept my terms, I’ll serve him.”

Signus paused, then asked, “So what are your terms?”

Robert Bertrand was a warrior inside and out. He’d lived on the battlefield, and that was where he felt most in his element. Without a war to fight, he wouldn’t be able to tell if he was alive or dead. To that end, serving Ryoma Mikoshiba wasn’t a bad choice. He would have no shortage of fights if he served under a man who made enemies of Rhoadseria’s nobility.

There’s something I have to make sure of first, though, Robert thought as he gave his terms to Signus.

“I want him to prove it...to prove that he’s the stronger warrior.”

Chapter 3: Where the Future Is Headed

A month and a half had passed since Ryoma Mikoshiba defeated Count Salzberg and took over northern Rhoadseria. The day was beautiful. There was hardly any wind, and the sunlight was soft, so the weather was pleasant and warm. It was a perfect day for a trip.

Most commoners didn't have any rain gear, so they hardly went outside on rainy days. They did all of their business on fine days like this one, and indeed, the cities' main streets were bustling with more activity than usual. For those who didn't have any business on such a peaceful day, they might indulge in tea and a book under the shade trees in their garden.

Sadly, the current ruler of the citadel city of Epirus couldn't afford to spend his time relaxing.

"Please look at this," said a girl in a maid's uniform.

Ryoma was in his office, deep within the Salzberg estate, where he'd been poring over documents since morning. The girl, Laura Malfist—one of his most lovely and trusted lieutenants—handed him another stack of papers. It was heavy enough that she could've used it for weight lifting.



“There’s more?” Ryoma grumbled. It was already approaching evening. Ryoma hadn’t had a single moment that day to sip tea or read a book, but he’d managed to whittle down the pile of papers to a mere dozen or so. Unfortunately, Laura had just added more to the pile.

Having spent all day cooped up in this office, Ryoma couldn’t rejoice about the extra work. He wasn’t lazy, but it was discouraging to complete a mountain of paperwork only for it to suddenly increase in size just as the end was in sight. In fact, not to mince words, he was honestly fed up.

I mean, I guess this is partially my fault. Still, my name’s not Sisyphus, is it?

Zeus punished Sisyphus for cheating death twice by making him roll a boulder up a hill. As he reached the peak, the boulder would roll back down, forcing him to repeat the act forever. While some might pity Sisyphus for having to do meaningless labor for eternity, no one seemed to have such mercy for Ryoma. Rather, anyone would agree that Ryoma was getting his just deserts.

That wasn’t to say that no one was on his side, though. Laura, who’d just added to his workload, was stricken with guilt that manifested on her lovely features.

“My apologies,” Laura said as she bowed her head. She was clearly uneasy about increasing her beloved master’s burden. “I really am trying to pick only those that require your immediate attention.”

Laura felt all the more guilty because she knew that since they’d seized Epirus, Ryoma had been getting just four hours of sleep a night. In truth, he was lucky to get any sleep at all. As unfortunate as it was, there were too many issues only the new leader of the north could handle. Ryoma made full use of Lione, Boltz, and some of their newest recruits, splitting up the workload with them as much as he could, but matters that required his direct and personal attention kept crawling out of the woodwork. Having few reliable retainers was one of the downsides of being a new noble.

“That’s not your fault,” Ryoma said with a resigned smile as he placed the bundle of documents on the table. “I complicated things for you, after all.”

Should I have gone easier on them? No. I think getting rid of all those festering wounds was the right call.

After Ryoma defeated Count Salzberg, he eliminated the ten houses of the north. But as his domain expanded, the task of managing it became exponentially harder. An annexation like this one, accomplished by military force, was especially rife with difficulties.

To make matters worse, Ryoma had removed most of the existing

governors, the majority of them second- or third-rate rulers. Their personalities were questionable, and they were, simply put, pathetic dregs of no use whatsoever. Keeping them in their positions would have led to nothing but corruption later down the line. Yet despite all that, Ryoma was still in the machine called the regime, and removing too many of the cogs would break the entire system.

On top of all that, Ryoma needed to implement new laws he'd never enacted before on this new domain of his. They were utterly revolutionary measures by this world's standards, and realizing them would require a great deal of trial and error.

With all of this combined, Ryoma hardly had time to breathe.

I guess my estimates were still too optimistic.

Bringing the ideas in his mind to fruition took a lot of work, as one might expect. But had Ryoma truly understood what that meant? He was starting to faintly feel like he hadn't. Still, Ryoma felt that these tasks were necessary, and now was the only time he'd be able to do them. Knowing that didn't make all the paperwork any less agonizing, though.

No point in bitching about it. I guess I'll get a few more out of the way.

Ryoma couldn't very well give up on everything now. The lives of many were riding on his shoulders.

Sighing deeply, Ryoma switched gears. The goddess of fate, however, seemed dead set on harassing him that day. As soon as he looked at the document before him, someone knocked on his office door. It seemed the guest he'd planned for had arrived. Turning his eyes to the clock on the wall, he rose from his seat.

"Laura," Ryoma prompted.

Laura nodded and opened the door. As soon as she did, a floral scent filled the room, as if it were a woman's inherent charm.

"My apologies for interrupting you in the middle of work, Baron Mikoshiha," Yulia Salzberg said as she bowed her head. Her smile was glowing.

Lady Yulia was dressed quite differently compared to the last time Ryoma saw her. That time, she'd been wearing mourning clothes for her husband, who'd perished in a duel with Ryoma. Now she was wearing a chic, classy black dress. She wore many more decorations compared to last time too.

"Not at all. Please, come in," Ryoma said with a smile as he beckoned her inside.

Laura led Lady Yulia to a chair in a corner of Ryoma's office meant for guests.

"If you'll excuse me," Lady Yulia said as she took a seat.

"Here you go," Laura offered, presenting them with teacups, though it wasn't clear when she'd had time to brew tea.

“My, thank you,” Lady Yulia replied. She nodded in gratitude and sipped on the tea without the slightest expression of caution. Their words and their attitudes naturally put her at ease. “Hehe... Yes, like I thought,” she said, a giggle leaving her lips.

It had the taste and aroma unique to Qwiltantian tea, and just this single cup held significance.

He makes some grand gestures, doesn't he? Making a show of this foreign flavor... Yet it doesn't come across as sarcastic.

It was just tea, but the meaning behind it wasn't lost on Lady Yulia.

Ryoma smiled at her.

I see my guess was right on the money.

Since the Holy Qwiltantia Empire was on the eastern coast of the continent, importing goods from there to Rhoadseria was extremely expensive. During Ryoma's second meeting with Count Salzberg, when they made their secret deal, Lady Yulia had intentionally served him this tea. She knew that when Ryoma met with Simone Christof previously, Simone had served him Qwiltantian tea too. Lady Yulia had meant it as silent admonishment for dealing with Simone. Ever since then, Ryoma had made sure to meet with Simone more discreetly. That was why Ryoma chose to serve Lady Yulia this tea today. That said, Lady Yulia had never verbally criticized Ryoma for contacting Simone.

Ryoma's secret meetings with Simone in one of Epirus's brothels felt like a sweet memory to him now.

“Looking back on it, that was a gentle hint that there was an information leak in the Christof Company, right?” Ryoma asked.

Lady Yulia remained silent, but Ryoma hadn't expected a response.

I guess she can't answer that... Ryoma thought. It would be proof that she had been betraying her husband all along.

“Well, regardless of what the truth is, I just thought this tea would be the best fit here.”

“Yes. You're quite right, Baron Mikoshiba,” Lady Yulia replied.

A serene atmosphere hung between them. Most people would think it strange—it had only been a month since Ryoma slew her husband—but Lady Yulia didn't hold any grudges against him for that. If nothing else, she at least kept up a serene front with him.

“It's strange,” Lady Yulia whispered, full of emotion. “When I first met you, Baron, I vaguely had this feeling about you, but I never thought this day would really come. Yet it has, and so soon, at that.”

Ryoma nodded. “Yes. I felt the same way.”

“First, I wanted to express my deepest gratitude for accepting my father's, Zack Mystel's, allegiance,” Lady Yulia said. She placed her

cup on the table, rose to her feet, and bowed deeply before him.

A noble lady bowing before a newly appointed baron was unthinkable in this world, but neither of them felt it was unnatural. Ryoma accepted Lady Yulia's attitude as a given, a stark display of the nature of their relationship.

"Oh, no, your father does very good work," Ryoma said. "Thanks to you two, I could make the final decision to settle things with Count Salzberg. And I know that you both play a big part in how our occupation of Epirus is received. Because of you, there hasn't been any opposition. I should be thanking you."

Ryoma wasn't just showering her with empty compliments. Lady Yulia and her father Zack had leaked information to Ryoma about Epirus's interior affairs and about the ten houses of the north.

When Zack Mystel first received the letter asking him to be Ryoma's informant, he'd thought it was a joke. Then he'd suspected that it was some plot against him. That was all in the past, though.

The Igasaki clan still gathered intel for Ryoma, but there was a limit to what they could do. When the war started in earnest, Count Salzberg's side turned more cautious and guarded. The Igasaki clan could gather information from Epirus's streets, but intelligence regarding Count Salzberg and the ten houses became much more difficult to obtain. It would have cost the lives of the clan's operatives to do so.

In addition to gathering intel, Lady Yulia and her father had helped Ryoma manage the fallout of the war. Had it not been for them, the occupation of Epirus wouldn't have gone as smoothly as it had.

"Your praise is excessive, my lord. I'm honored." Lady Yulia bowed her head again. "Father hopes he can remain in loyal service and be of aid to you in the future as well."

Lady Yulia's attitude was sincere and earnest. By calling him "lord," she expressed her intention to genuinely serve him. That was how it appeared on the surface, at least.

This could all be a ruse, but neither she nor her father have done anything suspicious yet. Gennou's people haven't reported anything shady, so I can probably use them freely. Still, how do I put them to use?

Given this world's low literacy rate, not many people in Ryoma's service could handle paperwork. Most commoners only knew how to write their own names, and even fewer could do basic arithmetic. However, managing internal affairs required one to both write and crunch numbers. Ryoma trusted Lione, Boltz, and the Crimson Lion mercenaries and greatly valued their combat prowess, but they weren't very good at paperwork.

Yulia Salzberg and Zack Mystel were currently the most capable

and reliable people Ryoma had to help run the Mikoshiba barony. Lady Yulia had effectively done just that for Count Salzberg ever since she'd married him, and her father was a monster of a businessman who led the emerging Mystel Company, becoming chief of Epirus's trade union. They weren't just good at writing and arithmetic. Litigation, office work, accounting—they were perfect for the job in many ways. Ryoma had to be wary of them, of course, but no one could deny that they were capable. Besides, while Lione and the others had their doubts about them, Ryoma wasn't that wary of Lady Yulia and her father. After all, Zack's secret messages had given Ryoma the final push he needed to seize the ten houses.

The two of them were highly disgruntled with Count Salzberg, so I doubt they resent me for killing him. Whether I can keep them both under my control comes down to my abilities.

They didn't resent him—that much was true—but that didn't mean they were keen on serving him.

That's one misunderstanding I absolutely cannot make.

Right now, Ryoma needed all the help he could get, so he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Yes. I believe I'll ask you two to aid me in the future. Not many of my vassals are skilled at management,” Ryoma said with a wry smile.

“Yes, understood. Father is already arranging for some promising young merchants from the union to be dispatched here, but...” Lady Yulia's expression turned troubled.

“He can't get enough of them yet?” Ryoma asked.

Lady Yulia nodded. “No, unfortunately not. In most situations they would be more than sufficient, but they're not enough for your purposes...”

“Yeah, I follow. Well, you can make up for what's missing by working in tandem with Simone.”

“Understood, my lord.”

Ryoma didn't miss how Lady Yulia's expression momentarily stiffened at the mention of Simone Christof's name.

I guess the bad blood between them still bothers her.

Lady Yulia's family owned the Mystel Company, and it had a troubled history with the Christof Company. Zack Mystel had snatched the position of union head from Simone's father, which had led to her father growing weak, senile, and infirm. On top of that, the Mystel Company had also applied a great deal of pressure on the Christof Company. One couldn't expect these two families to start getting along on a whim, and Ryoma didn't want that to begin with.

A ruthless battle between two merchants... Well, I thought they might've gone as far as poisoning Simone's father, but I was just assuming

the worst.

Cornering and finishing off a weakened opponent was a basic tactic, but it seemed Zack hadn't stooped to poisoning his rival, which was honestly a relief to Ryoma. He couldn't have a murderer helping manage his domain together with the family of his victim.

I heard that before Lady Yulia married Count Salzberg, she was quite close with Simone. Maybe that's why Zack went easy on the Christof Company.

Ryoma had gotten that feeling when he first visited that brothel, but it seemed Lady Yulia really was pressuring the Christof Company and interfering with Simone's potential clients. Even so, Lady Yulia had no real intention of crushing the company altogether.

If that was what she wanted, she could have resorted to arson or assassination.

It almost seemed that what she really wanted was to continually harass Simone to drive her out of Epirus.

I suppose the only way I'll know for sure is by asking her about it.

Whatever the truth was, the fact that Lady Yulia had never crossed the point of no return meant that their relationship could possibly be mended.

"You can rest easy," Ryoma said. "Northern Rhoadseria's commerce sphere will remain under Zack Mystel's jurisdiction, just as it was before. I will ask you to cooperate with the Christof Company, but considering the distribution of goods, your business should flourish like never before."

"Thank you very much," Lady Yulia said, unable to mask her surprise. "But are you sure?"

"Yes, absolutely. Under the condition that you obey the law and act fairly and in moderation," Ryoma said, his tone of voice an implicit warning.

Ryoma didn't have any issues with the Mystel Company growing wealthy. All people, not just merchants, worked in order to make a profit. However, that didn't mean one could stoop to any means to do so, and there was a limit to how wealthy one should be. Ryoma wasn't childish enough to reject the wealthy altogether, but he wasn't lenient enough to pardon rich people who'd rather watch the destitute starve than spare them a dime either.

"Are you talking about what you're going to do next? That..."

Lady Yulia was referring to a message that had been forwarded to all the major companies in northern Rhoadseria's commercial sphere. It contained only a simple outline of an idea, but the company heads had gone pale as soon as they'd read it. Only one man laughed about it—Yulia's father.

"Yes. It's still just a draft, so it'll probably see a lot of revisions,

but the overall direction will follow the outline. I have no intention of placing restrictions on everyone's business, but that's all predicated on you acting in accordance with that plan."

"And if someone were to disregard those laws?" Yulia inquired.

"It goes without saying," Ryoma replied with a cold smile. "They will be crushed without exception."

Lady Yulia swallowed nervously. Business in this world ran on contracts that could be renewed each time. Even Rhoadserian law stipulated that individual contracts would take precedence.

At first glance, that didn't seem so bad. Logic dictated that once a contract or a promise was made, one must honor their side no matter what it might entail. However, this could lead to negative consequences, because it enabled one to bind the other in a promise to do anything, no matter how absurd.

There was no cap on interest rates for debt, and there was no reason to compensate for breach of contract unless it'd been agreed upon when the contract was made. In extreme cases, both parties could agree that if one was unable to repay with money, they would instead pay with their life. William Shakespeare's famous play *The Merchant of Venice* deals with this topic extensively. Of course, most people learned when they were children to not make promises they couldn't keep, and most would agree that whoever made a promise they couldn't fulfill was at fault. The same went for business dealings.

Be that as it may, not all contracts started with both parties on equal footing. For example, the Mystel Company, the largest merchant company in Epirus and Lady Yulia's home, dealt with countless other companies. Most were medium- to large-scale businesses, but small stalls, retailers, and traveling merchants were also among their clientele. Were small merchants like those, whose profits were minimal, truly on equal footing with the Mystel Company when they negotiated?

The laws Ryoma was preparing to implement would revolutionize the existing trade conventions. They would set a ceiling on interest rates and outlaw retraction of credit loans, as well as tackle several other issues. It would both honor contracts and set limitations on them.

I do agree that things need to change, Lady Yulia thought.

Lady Yulia's current standpoint was that the people well acquainted with the new laws should be the ones to enforce them. In addition, an initial investment would be necessary until things started moving in earnest. When all those factors were added up, the sum was large enough that it even made the Mystel Company pause.

Based on what he said, though, there would be advantages.

This was just her impression of the initial draft Ryoma had shown

her, but the new laws would benefit the Mystel Company's future dealings. Setting a maximum for interest rates and recompensation sums was particularly useful, and though these restrictions could limit the merchants' freedom, it could also guarantee much profit. After all, the laws also applied to those who made them. In other words, the Mystel Company could draw a line in the sand when dealing with the Mikoshiba barony. Since nobles often made absurd demands, these kinds of limitations were appealing to a merchant family.

The implementation of these laws didn't mean that everything would change radically all at once, especially since they would only apply within Ryoma Mikoshiba's domain. The more pressing issue was the significance of a regional governor executing those kinds of laws.

Nobles do have a right to autonomously govern their domain, and their method for doing so is left mostly to their discretion, but...

As far as Lady Yulia knew, Ryoma's suggested laws were beyond what a governor was allowed to do. In truth, his actions could influence the entire country's economy. Essentially, Rhoadseria's ruler stipulated that kind of legislation and strictly defined the responsibilities and freedoms of the nobility. In addition, they guaranteed each governor's right to self-rule, giving them full authority on all matters of justice, legislation, administration, and military affairs within their domain.

Communication in this world was limited to smoke signals, runners, letters, and messenger birds, and with monsters and bandits prowling the highways, twenty-four-hour communication across borders was impossible. Therefore, it was difficult and inefficient for the sovereign to manage more distant domains, specifically regions along the border where war could break out at any second. The most logical solution for not just Rhoadseria but for any country was to give those regions the utmost authority and autonomy.

Regardless of how peace loving or warmongering a country might be, the only way to survive on this continent was to expand. Sitting quiet and focusing on nonaggressive defense didn't stop other countries from trying to invade. It could maybe stall for time, but eventually things would start falling apart. Trying to defend something was much harder than fighting an opponent to the death, and that held true regardless of if one was defending a person or a country.

For example, there was a belief in martial arts called "shinbu fusatsu," an idea that originally came from the *Book of Changes*, one of the five Chinese classics. While it might be a faulty translation, the closest interpretation was that those with the strength of the gods must not needlessly kill, but use their virtues to restrain themselves.

The idea was passed down into Japanese martial arts, where many

interpreted it to say that the essence of divine behavior was not to kill, but rather to incapacitate. In other words, martial arts weren't merely a weapon for slaughter. In addition, with the changing of the times, martial arts became more than a tool to increase one's station. It became a way of life, which might have influenced the interpretation of the original belief as well.

That wasn't the only interpretation of shinbu fusatsu, though. It could also mean that those without the strength of the gods had no choice but to slay their enemies if they were to defend themselves. This interpretation mocked the original lofty meaning, but reality often failed to align with ideals. Indeed, throughout the western continent's history, several countries had tried to maintain a nonaggressive defense, but they had all fallen to ruin. One such country was the Kingdom of Thene, a country that Lionel Eisenheit, Emperor of the O'tormea Empire, had consumed.

Ryoma's way of thinking is the very opposite of the Kingdom of Thene's policy. No, in a way, maybe it's the same.

Was their policy the wish of Thene's citizens after experiencing the horror of wars, or was it the result of someone's intentions? Nonaggressive defense sounded good on paper, but it was nothing more than an ideal. And the Kingdom of Thene was far too weak to uphold that ideal. Or perhaps it had simply grown too weak.

Among the western continent's central kingdoms, Thene had held an average amount of national power, and its politics and national policy were much the same as its neighbors. By all accounts, it was an average county with little to make it stand out. But all that had changed sixty or seventy years ago. After losing a territorial dispute with a neighboring country, the Kingdom of Thene went through a period of great change. It sought to reconcile with its neighbors, hoping to achieve peace and stability, and it avoided war with them, stressing dialogue over military action.

Thene's ruler probably feared warring with other countries over minor disputes, so they began restricting their nobles' rights to self-rule. Their reasoning for that was clear; even a small border dispute could escalate into a major war. Plus, if the fiefdoms each handled taxation differently, it would be detrimental to the financial growth they sought to achieve.

It was a sound idea, but many of the nobles had opposed it. No one liked restrictions on their authority, but war after war had worn the country down, and most of the citizens viewed the enacted reforms favorably. Some good came of it too. The citizens weren't conscripted into war, and the land experienced a financial boom far beyond what was expected of a country its size. It did lead to a war with the kingdom's nobles, but once that ended, Thene enjoyed over

twenty years of stability. Sadly, There's people failed to understand one thing: to the weak and impoverished, the strong and the wealthy were but targets to knock down from their thrones and devour.

Though they might be wealthy, those who refused to shed blood in war would never find true peace. So when a young Lionel Eisenheit brought war upon the land in the name of reviving his own failing country, There's peaceful days came to an end. Charging in like a demon, Lionel broke through the country's insufficient defenses and crushed the kingdom, striking it out of the history books.

Lionel Eisenheit was a warmonger, so this was an extreme example, but it illustrated that a country should use opportunities whenever possible and that nobles needed freedom to maintain a country's safety and prosperity. That said, freedom shouldn't be distributed equally among all nobles. A noble's rank and their domain's position could influence how much freedom they received.

That only stands to reason.

If Lady Yulia were in the queen's shoes, she wouldn't give all the nobles equal freedoms either. Counties far from the capital and near the border shouldn't have to send runners to consult with the sovereign about every emergency, but there was no need to give governors near the capital that same amount of freedom. In fact, if a ruler were to give all their nobles equal ruling rights, the whole country would cease to function as a singular entity.

But what should be done in Baron Mikoshiba's case?

Compared to Count Winzer's territory in the south, Ryoma's domain is closer to the capital, but it's still relatively far. Even though he's the lowest rank of noble, he should be given the highest degree of autonomy. However...

Was Ryoma smiling because he understood her concerns, or was it because he didn't even notice them?

I doubt he didn't realize it. But in that case...

In that case, just what was his endgame? As she thought about the answer to that question, something clicked into place.

I see. So that's what he's after.

There was no one reason for her realization. Fragmented bits of information had just converged to form a bigger picture, an image of a future no one in this world could envision.

But he's different. He's completely unlike any of us.

Lady Yulia felt inexplicably fearful of Ryoma, but at the same time, a sense of excitement and elation overcame her. With a small sigh, she reached for the teacup sitting on the table. She needed some way to calm her heart, which had begun racing.

Later that night, Lady Yulia went to the Mystal Company to report

the outcome of her meeting with Ryoma.

Zack Mystel, her father and the estate's owner, listened to her account, then smiled in satisfaction. "I see. A novel and fascinating idea. He knows what to focus on. I would love to accept him into my family as a son; he would surely help the company grow. A pity, really. He has such talent as a merchant too. Truly regrettable."

Coming from a man who'd built up his company into a lucrative business, this was the greatest compliment of all. Yet he'd said it to the one person who wouldn't overlook his meaning.

"Father!" Lady Yulia shouted, her fair brows rising. It was an unusual gesture for her; she always kept her emotions well hidden.

Zack's comment was inappropriate and almost disrespectful to Ryoma Mikoshiba. This world's class system wasn't as strict as Japan's was in the Edo period, but knights, royalty, and nobility still stood at the top. Zack's lament might have sounded like he was claiming Ryoma had no talent as a governor.

Lady Yulia was perhaps being overly cautious, but considering her current position, her concerns weren't unfounded.

Besides, accepting him as your son would mean...

Lady Yulia was undeniably beautiful, but Ryoma wasn't even twenty years old yet. Lady Yulia was over thirty, so their age gap was substantial. But even if she wasn't fit to be his legal wife, she could be his concubine. Moreover, their age gap wasn't all that shocking in this world. In most cases, men spent a long time setting up their fortune and career, so they could be in their forties or so when they started looking for a bride in her teens. It wasn't unheard of for women of high social standing to search for younger grooms either. It was perfectly possible that Lady Yulia, with her innocent yet alluring charm, could enter into an arrangement.

Nonetheless, her father's implication that she should be sent to Ryoma was crude. After all, it hadn't been long since her husband passed away.

I didn't love him, and Ryoma is talented enough that I could entrust our futures with him, but...

A widow couldn't marry her husband's killer; it would look incriminating. Plus, Lady Yulia was already infamous among Rhoadseria's nobility for being a foul woman and an evil wife. There were instances where a noblewoman married the victor of war to preserve the family line, but that was only in times of emergency. Lady Yulia's new lord didn't need to draw that kind of attention to himself, so her concern was understandable.

Zack merely stared at her, amused. "I was joking, my dear," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "No need to take my words so seriously."

All too quickly, the smile vanished from his features.

“Or maybe you should take them seriously,” he murmured, leveling a probing glance at his daughter. “I’ve asked you to take on difficult tasks for me for years now. If there’s anything I could do for you, I’d do it. And you’re still at the peak of your womanhood. Maybe it’s just my bias as your father, but you are a beautiful woman and are sure to be of aid to Ryoma. If you truly wish to wed him, I could try talking with him.”

His words were a father’s repentance for sacrificing his daughter’s happiness for years to comply with Thomas Salzberg’s whims. Although he’d gone through hell and back to build his business, deep regret ate away at his heart.

Most marriages in this world were a means of tying families together. They weren’t the products of true love. Finances and power were the main considerations, not the affections of the people involved. They were marriages of convenience, and they contained little of the modern notions of love. Even so, those marriages weren’t necessarily unhappy or misfortunate. Given time, even unwanted connections could bloom into genuine love.

No parent gave their daughter away expecting her to suffer, but despite Zack’s hopes, Lady Yulia’s marriage had brought her only humiliation and pain. As a father, he naturally regretted forcing his daughter into such a miserable situation.

Though Lady Yulia was happy to see her father express such sentiments, she shook her head.

“Father, I’m delighted that you feel that way, but...”

There was never any love between her and Count Salzberg, but that didn’t mean his death came as no shock.

I won’t say I don’t want to marry ever again, but for now, I just want to focus on work, no matter the task. If I ever remarry, it will be much, much later.

Lady Yulia wanted to drown herself in work until Count Salzberg became nothing but a memory. A day when she would once again want to marry might arrive—a year from now, or perhaps ten—or it might not ever come. Not to mention, no matter how hard she strove to maintain her beauty, age would eventually mar it. She was still young, but there was no escaping the passage of time.

Still, if the goddess of fate will show me pity...

That thought was a reckless wager.

“I see. Well, you have plenty of time. Think it through,” Zack said, nodding. Picking up on his daughter’s thoughts, he returned to the main topic at hand. “Incidentally, since Baron Mikoshiba is intent on establishing new laws, it seems he’s seriously considering forming his own country. A country unlike any this world has seen.”

Lady Yulia sighed. "So that really is what he's thinking..."

She had suspected as much, but hearing a third party say it drove home the importance of it all. She felt her heart might collapse under the weight of it.

Zack, on the other hand, laughed. "He attacked villages to concentrate refugees in Epirus because he expected this, didn't he?"

Rather than go around the villages to create a census, Ryoma had concentrated the population in one place to speed up the process. On top of that, he forbade the refugees from returning to their original homes, on the condition that he would grant them fields and houses equivalent to the fortunes and assets they had before. Because of that, there wasn't much unrest among the people, but it was certainly a burden on the Mikoshiba barony.

"So it wasn't just to increase tensions in Epirus during the war or have them eat through our supplies faster," Lady Yulia surmised.

"No, it wasn't. That was part of the plan, certainly, but as far as I can see, it was more than just that. It will influence matters one, two, and even three steps ahead. The reason he won't let the refugees return to their villages is that he sees it as a means to stop them from rebelling. His intentions don't end there either."

Zack took another sip of wine as he imagined the future that Ryoma was trying to create. As he did, he felt a surge of heat well up inside him—a sensation he'd long since forgotten.

"In which case, we must talk with Christof's girl, then," Zack stated, looking back at his daughter. "Yulia, my apologies, but could you handle her?"

"Me?" Lady Yulia asked. Her father was the leader of Epirus's merchant union, so apologizing to Simone and handling their future relations should fall to him.

"Even though Count Salzberg played a part, it would just make things worse if I were to apologize now," Zack explained. "Plus, you're close to her in age, and you're already acquainted with her. I think it'd be faster if you did it."

Lady Yulia couldn't argue with that; her father was certainly right. She was the best person for the job in terms of efficiency and certainty...but was that something a parent who'd just admitted to using their child should say? However, being able to switch gears quickly was how Zack had raised the Mystel Company to success in just one generation. Besides, his words weren't entirely the product of calculating self-interest.

What a difficult man you are, father.

Yulia could only smile bitterly at him.

Chapter 4: Master of the Twin Blades

It was the day after Lady Yulia's meeting with her father. Just past noon, Lady Yulia made her way to one of the Christof Company's brothels, as per her father's instructions. Her intention was to discuss her meeting with Ryoma the day prior, but she also planned to address the future coexistence of their companies.

Having arrived shortly before the agreed upon time, Lady Yulia followed a middle-aged receptionist to a reception room on the brothel's third floor.

They're less antagonistic than I thought they'd be. I was prepared for them to turn me away at the door, actually.

The room's decor was luxurious. The furniture and the carpet were high quality, even to Lady Yulia's discerning eye. It was clear that this room was meant for meeting important guests and clients.

Lady Yulia had sent a messenger this morning to arrange this meeting, and based on their report, it seemed the Christof Company wasn't fixated on its dislike of the Mysel Company.

Not that I intend to be careless, though.

Lady Yulia was aware that Simone and her company had reasons to resent her. Business rivalries could be similar to war. Just like in real combat, one took advantage of openings and moved in on a weakened opponent, but that didn't necessarily mean that the opponent would take that lying down. In addition, things were exacerbated by how the Mysel Company had used Lady Yulia's marriage to Count Salzberg to apply pressure on Simone. They had taken measures to ensure that things never crossed that final threshold, but Lady Yulia didn't think that would make for much of an excuse. She wouldn't be surprised if, despite this friendly welcome, Simone was planning to outright poison her. Fortunately, Lady Yulia's expectations were unwarranted.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Lady Yulia called, and the door opened.

"My apologies if I've kept you waiting, Lady Yulia Salzberg."

A woman entered the room, her hair arranged neatly. She wore a fair dress with a low neckline and a daring design, but the laces holding it together kept it from looking too striking.

Lady Yulia slowly rose from the sofa and shook her head. "Oh, I don't mind at all. If anything, I should be thanking you. After all, you

took time out of your day to meet me despite my sudden request.”

Simone’s expression wavered somewhat, and Lady Yulia noticed it. She just barely caught the momentary shift in Simone’s complexion, a shift so subtle that most people wouldn’t notice it at all. But Lady Yulia, who’d held countless negotiations over the years, wouldn’t miss it.

It looks like my intentions got across to her.



Normally, Lady Yulia would never need to apologize to Simone. She was a legal wife and member of House Salzberg, and with her husband dead, the citadel city of Epirus was hers in both name and substance. Simone, meanwhile, was just the acting president of a simple trade company. Lady Yulia was far above her in rank. Despite this, Lady Yulia had just apologized to Simone. It could only mean one thing.

That said, Simone was a fine woman who'd continued running the company even after her father became infirm. She wouldn't give away the momentum in the conversation that easily.

"It wouldn't do to talk while standing, so please, do have a seat," Simone said as she sat opposite Lady Yulia. "So, what business brings you to me on this fine day?"

Her attitude remained strictly polite, but it made the unpleasant distance between them that much more palpable.

Like I thought. But, no...

Before Lady Yulia married Count Salzberg, she and Simone had been close. Both were daughters of major firms in Epirus, and both were talented women blessed with business acumen. They were rivals even back then, so they hadn't exactly been friends, but they had exchanged greetings every now and then, and they'd talked and exchanged pleasantries during dinner parties and meals.

Their friendly rivalry had crumbled when Yulia Mystel married Count Thomas Salzberg. Count Salzberg deeply disliked his father and wanted to rebel against him, and those emotions progressed into full blown hatred and a desire to kill. He'd had his reasons, and the hatred had continued to smolder even after he killed his father and younger brother.

Unfortunately, the real problems had come after that. Count Salzberg had wanted to wipe away any and all traces of his father. He submerged himself in pleasure without caring one bit for governing his domain and even besmirched the very name of House Salzberg, a proud warrior family, because he resented and hated his family as a whole. In fact, he hated the very existence of nobility. He despised being a member of the aristocracy he so loathed and sought to escape from that reality. To him, the Christof Company, which had supported the citadel city's economy for generations, was a despicable opponent whose existence he simply couldn't tolerate.

House Salzberg was charged with two important duties: protecting the kingdom's northern borders and warding off monsters invading from the Wortenia Peninsula. To do so, it had spent a vast amount on military expenses, which in turn had greatly impacted their financial standing and left them in dire straits. The only reason House Salzberg

was able to maintain appearances at all was because the Christof Company was working behind the scenes to support its headship and Epirus's financial growth.

The first thing Count Salzberg did upon inheriting the headship was change the head of the city's merchants' union. To him, the Christof Company was an enemy that had backed his hateful father for years. Instead, he chose Zack Mystel, the man who'd built up the Mystel Company within a single generation, to be the new head of the union.

When Count Salzberg first approached Zack with the idea, Zack had been perplexed. But as a merchant, he couldn't turn down an offer that would expand his company that much, so he'd agreed to Count Salzberg's proposal. In a way, he'd had no choice but to accept. If he'd turned Count Salzberg down and refused to give the count his daughter in marriage, Count Salzberg would have used his full authority to utterly crush the Mystel Company.

The rumors said that Zack was the one who'd approached Count Salzberg with the intention of selling off his daughter, but the truth was quite the opposite. Zack was, in a sense, both a victim of Count Salzberg's and an accomplice. That had hardly mattered to Simone's side, however. The victim of a crime cared little for the tragic circumstances that drove their assailant to commit it.

Even so, I can't back down now. What would be the point of coming here, then?

Ryoma Mikoshiba had made it very clear the day prior that he wanted the Mystel Company and the Christof Company to work together. That also meant that he wasn't going to pick sides, something he was adamant about. Still, if the two companies were to outright clash, there was no guarantee that he would stick to his word.

If it came to that, Ryoma would likely expel the Mystel Company first. It wasn't explicit whether that would destroy their company entirely, but it was obvious that they wouldn't be able to continue business like they used to.

If it's between newcomers like us and Simone, it goes without saying. Simone has sided with him from the very beginning.

It wasn't even favoritism; that was the rational choice. If the Mystel Company wanted to be the better choice, it would have to be the more profitable and reasonable option. All the same, beating the Christof Company's profit, when it had so far managed all trade in the Mikoshiba barony, would be difficult. If it couldn't be the most profitable, it would have to be the most moral and just company of the two.

Of course, it would be best if our two companies really could work together...

Whether reconciliation was possible depended on the other party's personality and way of thinking, especially in this case, where Lady Yulia was a victim of circumstances too. If Lady Yulia were to needlessly demand justice for that, they probably wouldn't be able to come to a compromise.

Yulia's concerns proved to be misplaced, though.

"My apologies. That might've been an unpleasant way of putting it. Do forgive me," Simone said, smiling at Lady Yulia. It was the same soft smile Lady Yulia knew from before.

Simone then picked up the bell on the table and rang it twice. Lady Yulia watched her suspiciously, but Simone just smiled again.

"I'll have some more tea prepared," she said. "I'm sure we have a lot to discuss, but we won't make the most beneficial deals if we negotiate while we're both on edge."

At that moment, a maid entered the room as if she'd been waiting for Simone to say that. Simone instructed her to prepare tea. The tea had likely been made ahead of time, because as soon as the maid clapped twice, another maid opened the door and pushed a cart loaded with a teapot, cups, and snacks into the room.

The maid served them with practiced motions. Lady Yulia watched as she poured an amber-colored liquid with a reddish tint into her cup. Lady Yulia recognized it as soon as the scent wafted up.

This aroma...

It was the same tea Ryoma had served her just the day prior—black Qwiltantian tea.

I see. So that's what this is about. I didn't think she'd pay me back with the same thing I did way back when. Ironic.

Lady Yulia understood everything now, except whether Simone meant it as a prank or as malicious provocation. She watched as Simone picked up her cup and took a calm, collected sip of her tea, but Lady Yulia couldn't read what was in her heart.

The air filled with tension...and then Simone laughed. Her demeanor had completely changed. Her gentle smile was gone, and her expression was now that of a hardened merchant.

"My apologies. I might've taken my jokes too far. I heard you often drink this tea during your meetings with the lord, so I thought I should try it. I meant no ill will."

"I see. That's good, then."

Lady Yulia nodded, seemingly satisfied with that explanation. Her heart was still throbbing, and she struggled to calm her fears, but Simone's new attitude did put her somewhat at ease.

It really was just a prank, albeit in bad taste. She wanted to get back at me on some level. I swear, she hasn't changed in that regard. But if so...

Lady Yulia knew that Simone Christof usually maintained a mild-

mannered facade but could exhibit a startling degree of toxicity. When Simone dealt with a difficult opponent, she made some truly scathing remarks. When she talked to an enemy, she surpassed even that.

Simone likely sensed Lady Yulia's hesitation, because she suddenly said, "Let us do away with the games and get to the heart of the matter, shall we? I know your reasons for coming here."

"I see. And what does the Christof Company intend to do?" Lady Yulia asked, her expression stiff.

In Lady Yulia's eyes, ninety percent of this conversation had gone as expected, but she still couldn't know for sure what would come next. Whatever Simone said could seal her father's and the company's fate. Not even Lady Yulia could remain composed in this situation.

"Yes, well... We have some emotional baggage to sift through, but I'm aware of your circumstances, and more importantly, I can't ignore the lord's will."

Simone dropped her cold expression and smiled at Lady Yulia.

"The Christof Company will continue to use Sirius as its base of operations to maintain trade along the coast, namely with Helnesgoula and Myest. We would like for the Mystel Company to handle sales with the three kingdoms of the east, especially Rhoadseria, in tandem with us."

Lady Yulia exhaled loudly. It wasn't proper etiquette for a young woman, and normally she wouldn't display her emotions so outwardly, but she couldn't restrain her relief.

"I understand. Thank you kindly. I am grateful for your magnanimous words."

"Oh, it's fine. Doing so costs me nothing at all," Simone said, her tone sincere. In truth, she had no choice but to accept this reconciliation.

There isn't any value in fighting the Mystel Company now anyway, Lady Yulia told herself, confirming her suspicions.

Simone would surely gain satisfaction from crushing the Mystel Company, but from a business standpoint, it would be a bad move. The Christof Company was wholly occupied at present. Trade activity in the north had been on the rise since Helnesgoula and the three kingdoms of the east had formed a trade union.

At first, only the Christof Company's ships handled shipping to those kingdoms, but now, vessels from all over the continent sailed for trade. Sirius had even started allowing ships from both Helnesgoula in the north and Myest in the east to stop and restock as they traveled the northern sea routes.

Ferrying goods by ship to Sirius was both the fastest and the easiest way to transport most goods in one trip. As a result, many merchants had sought permission to use Sirius's harbor. However,

back then, Ryoma had allowed only the Christof Company to dock in his harbor, making it essentially Simone's exclusive port. Thanks to that, the Christof Company's profits had skyrocketed.

There were drawbacks to their expansion, though. Because of the sudden growth, the Christof Company didn't have enough people to handle operations. They'd managed to stay on top of things so far, but it had been difficult. It was becoming a burden to dispatch clerks who could read, write, and calculate numbers.

With the situation being what it was, it would be insane to crush the Mystel Company. In fact, if the Christof Company did crush it, it would create a financial void in the northern regions—a void that the Christof Company wouldn't be able to fill. At worst, a third party could move in to close the gap, and they might not necessarily act in the Mikoshiba barony's favor.

Compared to that, partnering with us is a much better alternative.

Even so, Simone's feelings could have been an issue. Calculating profit and loss was an exact science, but emotions often muddled the waters, leading people to reject the most profitable option. Nonetheless, Lady Yulia had predicted that Simone would know better than that—and the gamble had paid off.

It seemed Simone was aware of Lady Yulia's expectations. They nodded at each other, and the tension between them petered out. The two women, and the two companies, had officially reconciled.

"Since we have this chance, may I ask a question?" Lady Yulia said as she brought her teacup to her lips. "Miss Simone, what do you predict the lord's next step will be?"

"What do I predict?" Simone replied.

"Yes. From what I've seen, it seems he intends to rule over the ten houses of the north's territory."

Lady Yulia had actually doubted Ryoma's intentions this whole time. After all, Ryoma had burned down the ten houses' domains during the war.

He did that to drive the refugees out and tilt things in his favor when he besieged Epirus. But if he wanted to rule those territories after, that was a bad play. More importantly, does he know that?

Ryoma had used a viable war tactic, but as a merchant, Lady Yulia saw it as ruining the territory's economic equilibrium. On top of that, burning the refugees' homes and assets would create unrest among his population. No such feelings had surfaced yet, but it was only a matter of time until things reached a boiling point. The best way to avoid that would be to permit them to return to their villages and resume their lives, but Ryoma seemingly didn't have any intention of doing that. Many of the refugees were still detained in Epirus's streets and outskirts.

He's providing them with food and shelter, so things are much better for them, but...

Ryoma hadn't abandoned them, so he was obviously aware of the problems, but Lady Yulia just couldn't fathom what his endgame was.

Simone, understanding Lady Yulia's misgivings, nodded and said, "Indeed. I'm not privy to all of his plans, but I think this is all groundwork for the future."

"Groundwork?" Lady Yulia asked.

"Yes. He's preparing for a war that will break out in the near future."

Lady Yulia looked at Simone. "With the House of Lords? I mean, I doubt they will simply overlook his war on the north, but are you saying that he's already considering the possibility of a war with them too?"

Lady Yulia's surprise was understandable. The House of Lords was the cornerstone of Rhoadseria's justice system. It arbitrated conflicts among governors and punished nobles who'd broken national law. It would not stand by and do nothing after the war Ryoma had waged. Ryoma Mikoshiba had earned the wrath of Rhoadseria's nobility, and they would not overlook his actions. War was an inevitability.

"That's part of it," Simone said, "but I think he's looking even further ahead."

"Further ahead?" Lady Yulia furrowed her brows. "You don't mean..."

Lady Yulia realized what Simone was implying and came to a conclusion, but it was so absurd that, if this were any other conversation, she'd have laughed it off. But it wasn't, and she didn't.

Is she serious? A mere baron going that far? But if you think of it that way, everything does start to fall into place.

The pieces gradually began to form a bigger image, a picture more vast and grand than anything Lady Yulia Salzberg had ever envisioned.

"So this is all just groundwork?" Lady Yulia asked. "He's calculated everything, even his war on the north, all so he can... So his duel with Sir Robert in a few days, to decide whether Robert will serve him, is that...?"

Simone nodded. "In all likelihood. Burning the ten houses' villages, filling Epirus with refugees, keeping them there... His final objective is..."

The two women gazed at each other until, eventually, they both let out the breaths they'd been holding.

"So that's what he's thinking," Lady Yulia concluded. "The man we're serving is either the most indomitable hero of all time or the world's greatest, most unsalvageable fool."

Simone smiled bitterly, but she didn't blame Lady Yulia for the comment, instead implying that she felt much the same way.

"It doesn't matter much which he is," Simone muttered, speaking from her heart. "Be he a hero or a fool..."

Was this the cold, calculating nature of a merchant? Or was it a woman's affection for a man? Whichever it was, Simone Christof would not choose a different path. Her heart had been set ever since the day she first met Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Lady Yulia nodded deeply, indicating that she felt much the same way.



A large, round moon floated outside the window. It was just past midnight, but candlelight still illuminated Ryoma's room in Count Salzberg's estate. Ryoma was resting on the sofa, staring up at the ceiling.

"So tomorrow's the day," he murmured to himself. He was alone, and his voice echoed loudly through the room.

Dammit. Am I nervous?

Ryoma couldn't help but sneer at his own actions. His duel with Robert Bertrand to decide whether Robert would serve Ryoma was at noon tomorrow. It wasn't a fight to the death, just a practice match, but it could still be dangerous for two reasons. The first was that this duel was a showcase to illustrate that Ryoma was worthy of Robert's service. Robert was famous across the neighboring kingdoms as one of Count Salzberg's Twin Blades and as one of the strongest warriors in Rhoadseria. It was going to take a great feat from Ryoma in order to show his strength and worthiness as Robert's new lord.

The second reason was that since Ryoma wanted Robert's service, Ryoma obviously couldn't kill him, but nothing prevented Robert from killing Ryoma. On top of that, even if neither of them wanted to kill the other, Robert was so skilled that even a careless move could get either of them killed. They were also fighting with real weapons, not ones used for training, and they could use martial thaumaturgy. Therefore, while this wasn't real combat, it was as close as it could get. One unlucky move could literally cost Ryoma his life.

The biggest concern, however, was that Ryoma wasn't in prime condition.

I'm doing much better now, but...

During his duel with Count Salzberg, Ryoma had used Kikoku's power, which had temporarily unlocked the use of the sixth Ajna chakra, located between his brows. It was as if he'd been an electrical appliance charged with more electricity than he was meant to hold, allowing him to operate beyond his normal capacities. Such a surge

was sure to fry the motor or burn the wiring, and it had naturally resulted in a backlash.

Ryoma had used some of Kikoku's prana as a battery, taking it into his body. That had given him temporary access to the Ajna chakra, which he couldn't use yet. With that, he'd wielded more power and speed than he was capable of and successfully slayed Count Salzberg.

In yoga and Chinese sorcery, prana flows through the nadi, channels connected along the median line of the body at points called chakras. It might be helpful to liken the nadi to blood vessels and the chakras to organs.

Unfortunately, when Kikoku unleashed its power, it had damaged Ryoma's nadi. It didn't impede his daily activities, and he could do office work without any trouble, but every time he tried to use martial thaumaturgy, his entire body screamed in agony.

Still, considering how reckless he'd been at the time, Ryoma counted himself lucky to have gotten away with so little damage. Using martial thaumaturgy hurt, but as long as he didn't use it, he felt no pain. Ryoma could have been irreparably injured, so relatively speaking, he got off with little consequence. The pain wouldn't last forever either, and his nadi would recover given time.

I was prepared for the risks when I used that power, but...

Kikoku was full of mysteries. Douman Igasaki, the first head of the Igasaki clan, had forged it, and the Igasaki clan had passed it down for generations, but the clan's members knew little about its powers. Ryoma still didn't know the full breadth of its capabilities either, even though Gennou had given it to him and he'd become the master of the Igasaki clan. One thing had gradually become clear, though; it took in the prana of those it slew and stored it within itself. It also allowed its wielder to absorb that prana, temporarily granting them superhuman strength.

The first time Ryoma had used that power, he'd experienced some backlash.

But there's a world of difference between using it in training and using it in live combat. The backlash with the latter is much harsher. I never expected it would take so long to recover from it.

It was similar to a muscle ache that filled his entire body. Much like how a weightlifter felt pain the day after their exercise, Ryoma was feeling the feedback of what he'd done. But a weightlifter's aching muscles passed after a few days, and Ryoma still hadn't fully recovered even after two months.

And now, Robert wanted to duel with Ryoma, but Ryoma's body was still far from peak condition. In a sense, it was almost suicidal to go through with it.

Still, that doesn't mean I can postpone the duel.

Things wouldn't end with their fight. Once he settled this with Robert, his plans would begin in earnest. Based on Ryoma's estimate, it wouldn't be long before the House of Lords responded to his war on the north. Of course, he had weapons ready to fight the House of Lords, and Robert's acceptance would be the final touch in his preparations for the coming war.

The question is how much I will recover before the war starts.

Suddenly, Ryoma heard a knock on his door.

"Come in," he instructed.

The door opened, revealing two girls wearing maid uniforms.

"Thank you for waiting," they said in unison.

They were twins, so their facial features were alike, but it was easy to tell them apart. One had silver hair while the other had golden hair.

Laura, the older of the two, and Sara, the younger, entered the room. They pulled Ryoma up from the sofa and led him to his bed.

"If you'll excuse us, Master Ryoma..."

They began removing Ryoma's clothes, but not for a bit of fun before his match with Robert.

"I'm sorry you have to do this so late at night, you two," Ryoma apologized.

Laura shook her head. "No, don't let it bother you."

Now shirtless, Ryoma sat cross-legged on the bed. The twins' small, smooth hands slid over his wide, muscular back.

"Let's begin, then," Sara said.

Ryoma closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and silently bid his chakras to rotate. He entered something similar to a meditative state, but then his body shivered with pain stemming from his still-damaged nadi. Aside from that, Ryoma also felt something warm flow into him from the Malfist sisters' hands. The warmth seeped into every cell in his body, feeling gentle and reassuring as it slowly but gradually curbed the pain tormenting him.

Ryoma couldn't tell how long they'd spent in that state. Was it twenty minutes? Thirty? When large beads of sweat rolled down his forehead, staining the bedsheets, the twins finally let go of his back.

"How do you feel?" Laura asked, something she'd asked countless times already.

"Yeah, it's fine..." Ryoma replied, giving her the same reply as before.

The chances of a full recovery at this point were slim, but Laura and Sara's powers had helped tremendously. All that remained was to try using martial thaumaturgy.

"Let's try it out, then," Ryoma said, getting off the bed and taking

a deep breath. He pulled air into his stomach as he inhaled, and pushed it out as he exhaled—similar to the meditative breathing techniques unique to karate. He closed his eyes and concentrated his consciousness.

I can feel it...

It began rushing up his spinal column like a torrent, surging from his perineum and up through his nadi. Ryoma's eyes fluttered open. Prana ran through his nadi all the way to his head, forming a pillar of light.

It only lasted a moment—an entire world encapsulated in a second. The flow of prana ebbed, and the rate at which his chakras rotated gradually decreased—like the tides had receded.

Bit by bit, his chakras began rotating at a more consistent pace. Ryoma opened and closed his hands, feeling the tension in his muscles and the state of his body.

Not bad. This is pretty good, actually...

This process was taxing, both on Ryoma, who received the prana, and the Malfist sisters, who gave him their prana. The three of them had to synchronize their breathing, and since their bodies were producing more prana than usual, they had to perfectly control their energies.

Their efforts were not in vain. Though only momentarily, Ryoma was able to open the seventh chakra, the Sahasrara chakra, the limit of what mankind could achieve. In the Chinese occult, this was akin to achieving immortality.

Well, it's only for a moment, so it's not much good in a fight.

By meditating, steadying his breathing, and borrowing the Malfist twins' power, Ryoma had reached the level of an ascendant, if only for a second. In order to retain this power, he would need to use force of will and freely control this state.

In any case, this was massive progress compared to what Ryoma had done before. In all likelihood, when Kikoku had forcibly unlocked Ryoma's sixth chakra during his duel with Count Salzberg, it had given him the strength to momentarily open his seventh chakra.

That just leaves...

Ryoma glanced at the wall. His eyes were fixed on a spear resting on a special plaque.

"We pray for your success, Master," Sara said.

Ryoma turned around and nodded. The Malfist sisters got up from the bed and bowed their heads.



The following day, just as the sun reached its zenith in the sky, two men equipped for battle faced off in the courtyard of the Salzberg

estate. One of them wore metal armor and held a long-handled battle-axe, a weapon that had served him for many years, in his right hand. The other one, a young man with a mature-looking face, wore leather armor and held a weapon rarely seen in this world—a spear or trident of sorts. The blade branched off to the left and right, and it was attached to a metal tube for a handle.

They stood twenty meters or so apart and gazed silently at each other. Signus Galveria, the judge of this match, stood between them. This duel didn't require a referee, since Ryoma and Robert would decide who the winner was, so Signus's role was just to watch over their battle and see it to its conclusion.

There were no spectators. Ryoma had forbidden everyone, even the Malfist twins and Yulia Salzberg, the original owner of the estate, from coming here. A group of experienced Igasaki ninjas led by Gennou guarded the thirty-meter perimeter of the courtyard, forming a double layer security network, so no one could enter. There might have been other people in the mansion more skilled than a single ninja, but the Igasaki clan was adept at fighting as a group, and few people could penetrate their watchful gaze.

Robert Bertrand was the first to break the silence.

“Before we start, let me thank you, Baron Mikoshiba. Thank you for accepting my rude proposal, even though I am nothing but a prisoner to you.”

Robert bowed his head with a perfect knight's bow. It was an unusual gesture from him, as Robert was usually gruff and arrogant. Signus, the sole witness, tensed, and Ryoma noticed it at once. However, Robert's attitude was no trick, nor was it a lie. The terms he'd drawn up were absurd. He'd basically told Ryoma that if he wanted him as a vassal, Ryoma would need to prove that he was the stronger one.

Normally, no one would be fickle enough to want Robert as their vassal that badly. Moreover, Robert had lost in the war and was being held prisoner. He should have been speaking to Ryoma's heart, seeking mercy and begging for his life.

Despite this, Ryoma had willingly accepted Robert's arrogant, belligerent demand. That was a warrior's nature—the urge to compete with the mighty and compare one's mettle. Ryoma must have realized Robert's feelings, because he met Robert's words with silence. He had no words to tell him because all the answers were in the match that was about to begin.

“Let's get this started, shall we?” Robert growled, holding his axe with both hands and leaning it on his right shoulder.

Ryoma spread his legs wide and crouched in response. He held his spear between a middle and lower stance—at his waist while keeping

it aimed at Robert's legs.

Fighting spirit surged from both opponents. Signus could feel the heat in the air, and a lump formed in his throat.

Robert made the first move. He immediately closed the distance and swung his axe down with all the force he could muster. An axe was Robert's weapon of choice. Axes stressed force over technique, so swinging with all of one's might was more useful than blocking and defending.

Ryoma, however, wouldn't allow his opponent to get a hit that easily. He blocked Robert's diagonal slash with his spear's handle.

They stood close enough to feel each other's breaths, but after struggling for a moment, they changed their stances. They were too close for long-range weapons to be useful.

How about this, then?! Robert thought as he quickly pulled back, creating some distance between them. He let his axe fall, holding it like it was dangling in his grip...then swept it up from below right toward Ryoma's neck.

Ryoma tilted his head to the side, easily avoiding the swipe.

This bastard can detect my range...

Robert had fought over ten thousand opponents so far, both human and monster alike, but in most cases, he'd dispatched his foes before they ever really locked blades. Some of his opponents had been able to block his swings, but he'd never met anyone who evaded him with so little movement.

I see. So he doesn't focus on technique in large-scale battles, but instead saves his more refined skills for one-on-one combat.

Robert's animalistic senses instinctively sussed out the nature of Ryoma's capabilities. Ryoma used the techniques his grandfather, Koichiro Mikoshiba, had passed down to him for live combat to dispatch a single opponent. And, unlike Robert, Ryoma hadn't nurtured his skills on the battlefield.

The difference in their techniques was obvious. That wasn't to say that one way of learning was superior to the other, but simply that they were different in nature. Yet, somehow, Ryoma had mastered his skills to the point that his performance was abnormal.

Robert took a large step back to rearrange his posture. That was exactly what Ryoma wanted him to do, though.

"It's my turn now!" Ryoma cried.

He thrust his spear at Robert's throat. It was just an ordinary thrust, no tricks to it, and normally Robert would have been able to deflect it with his axe, but the sheer speed of it was faster than anything Robert had experienced. It was a thrust delivered with the speed of a god.

Robert somehow deflected the first blow, but then came another

in quick succession. Robert desperately swung his axe to block Ryoma's attacks.

Dammit, how fast is he?! And he pulls back his thrusts so quickly!

Robert jumped back to create more distance between them, while Ryoma recovered and fixed his posture. Robert scanned Ryoma's body. Ryoma was holding his spear up, ready for his next move. It was then that Robert spotted something familiar about his stance.

I think I see. So that's the trick behind his speed.

The tube on the spear's shaft slid back and forth, so Ryoma could thrust and pull back faster than if he were just holding it directly on the handle. Still, this was easier said than done, and it took practice and technique to use. Yet Ryoma could manage it easily.

I hate to admit it, but as far as technique goes, he's got the edge.

Just from their clashes thus far, Robert had gotten a general idea of Ryoma's skills. From that, he could tell that since his forte was pushing with all his strength, he couldn't withstand a prolonged battle.

That leaves me one option!

Robert cast aside all notions of defense and focused all his strength into one fatal attack.

"Ooooooooooooooh!"

Howling from the pit of his stomach, Robert reinforced his steel-like muscles with martial thaumaturgy. His entire body became visibly more bulky, and his face turned red. It was like a fire surged up inside him.

Ryoma merely held up his spear, but his fighting spirit matched Robert's. He was like the still surface of a lake, reflecting the sky above him, but Robert could tell that under that calm surface was a furious surge.

Robert was the first to move. His legs reinforced by thaumaturgy, he kicked against the ground with supernatural force. He launched like a bullet toward Ryoma and closed the distance between them in one bound. Then, without slowing, he shifted the force from his waist to his shoulders, swinging his axe down with all his might.

Signus had never seen a finer blow from his sworn friend. Any attempt to block it would shatter one's guard and crush them at once. Despite that, Ryoma remained completely still as he held his spear up.

Robert howled and swung at Ryoma with everything he had. But just then, Ryoma slashed up with his spear, as if he were skimming the air. Because of the elasticity of its wooden shaft, the spear rushed at Robert. It flew toward Robert's hands, which were gripping his ax.

Fine. Have a few fingers. Take my whole hand if you want!

A drawback to using a long-handled weapon was that the hands holding it were a weak spot—a natural opening created by the very

design of the weapon. Robert knew this, so rather than pointlessly trying to dodge, he pressed the attack even if it meant risking his life.

Ryoma seemed to anticipate Robert's resolve. He rotated the spear's grip in his hands and moved the cross-shaped spear's tip. It caught the ax's handle and threw it into the air. Ryoma then rotated his body, changing position as he jabbed the spear's handle into Robert's unguarded stomach.

The blow expelled all the air from Robert's body, and he felt stomach acid rising up and burning his throat. He crumpled to the ground, overcome with pain and gasping for air. Nevertheless, even in his weakened state, Robert looked for a chance to turn the tables.

Well played. His skills are impressive. I didn't think he'd deflect my strongest blow. But this match isn't over yet!

Robert's experience on the battlefield had taught him that the moment when his opponent was confident that they'd won was the prime opportunity to strike back. Robert clenched his hands and prepared to defeat Ryoma when he let his guard down.

This wasn't a cowardly act. In fights to the death, carelessness could claim one's life. Robert had taken advantage of that carelessness and defeated many opponents with nothing but his monstrous brute strength. However, his opponent this time was different.

As Robert looked up, the glint of a blade blinded him. After Ryoma had delivered that last blow, he'd carefully assumed his former stance, keeping the tip of his spear aimed at Robert.

No openings, eh? Robert thought as all the strength drained from his body.

"That's enough!" Signus called, signaling the end of the battle.

That was the day that the two warriors praised as Count Salzberg's Twin Blades entered Ryoma Mikoshiba's service.

Epilogue

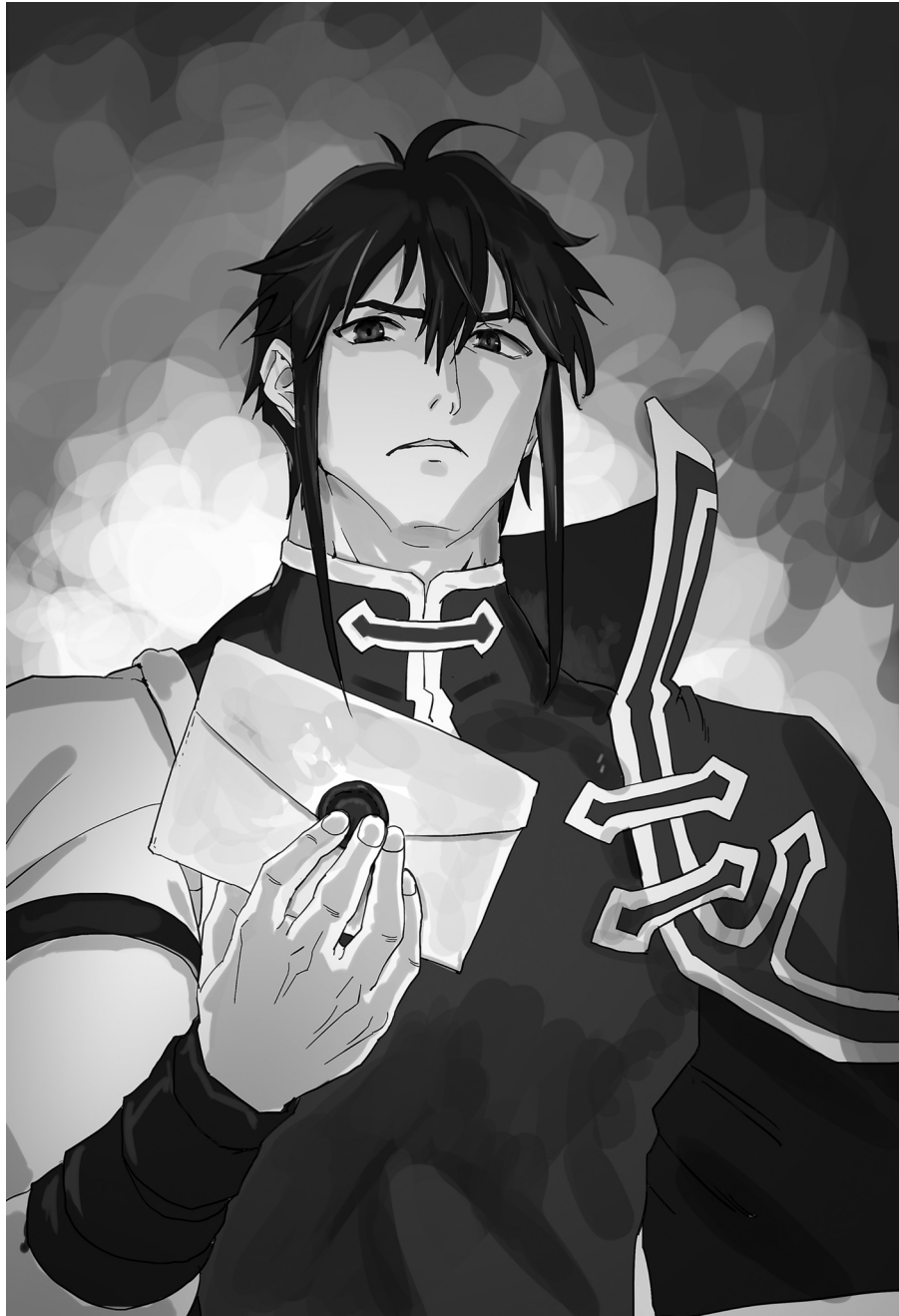
It had been two months since Ryoma Mikoshiba took over northern Rhoadseria. He was gradually growing used to the paperwork and was slowly becoming confident in his abilities as a governor.

One afternoon, a man appeared before Ryoma. The man had ridden out from Pireas, pausing for neither sleep nor rest, and his body reeked of sweat. Despite this, he was ushered to Ryoma's office as soon as he arrived.

The man looked to be in his thirties. His appearance was quite average—he had the sort of face one could find anywhere—and his most striking feature was that he was a bit full, though by no means fat. One could pass him by and not notice his presence. That made him the perfect candidate for delivering secret messages.

The man took out a letter from his pocket and handed it to Ryoma.

"I was wondering when I'd get this," Ryoma said after a long pause. "It definitely came later than I expected."



The letter was sealed with a black-colored wax. Ryoma didn't need to check its contents, though. In truth, the letter was probably meaningless.

The messenger didn't understand what Ryoma meant. "It was late?" he murmured, taken aback.

Ryoma glanced at the man, his eyes seeing right through him. Ryoma was, in fact, judging the value of this reserved man. Was he really just a mere messenger, or was he something more?

Well, if the count picked him, it must mean that he trusts this person. But...is he really trustworthy?

The man did seem honest and reliable, and Count Bergstone wouldn't have entrusted such a precious letter to a vassal he didn't swear by. Nonetheless, the man didn't seem very intelligent. No one would call him dumb, but he couldn't read the room.

Despite being trusted with important information, he openly displayed interest in the letter he'd delivered. Ryoma could understand a messenger being curious as to what they were carrying, and had this been an ordinary letter, Ryoma wouldn't have minded this plain, ordinary courier.

But he came here secretly, meaning he's probably a spy or an operative for Count Bergstone's family. He should be more than an amateur, if nothing else.

Count Bergstone had given this man work that needed to be done discreetly and behind the scenes, and judging by the man's appearance, it was clear that he'd been ordered to deliver this message as soon as he could. He'd chosen not to rest at an inn and fix his appearance before he showed himself to Ryoma, so he must have known the letter he carried was of the utmost importance.

On the other hand, people in the underworld thought it was careless to ask about a letter's contents.

They say all things are good in moderation, and that's exactly right.

One should always be aware of how far to take things, and knowing too much could cost one their life.

No, maybe I've got it wrong. Maybe he's pretending to react while knowing this?

The man had a sincere, frank face, but on closer inspection, it was the face of a beast lying in wait to pounce on its prey. Perhaps Count Bergstone had sent him for good reason.

Still, why did he ask that?

If it was simple curiosity, Ryoma could understand that. It threw his validity as a spy into question, but Ryoma could simply report this to Count Bergstone and make sure that this man wasn't trusted with any more important information going forward. But if it wasn't just

curiosity, it was a major issue.

Did he do it on a whim? Did Count Bergstone order him to say it? No, the chances of either of those are slim. And moreover...

Ryoma may have conquered northern Rhoadseria, but his control of the region wasn't stable yet. He couldn't afford any unplanned situations, especially not when he knew that an organization manipulating the continent from the shadows was at large.

Caution is necessary.

In his short exchange with the messenger, Ryoma concluded that, considering what was to come, removing any uncertain factors could be crucial.

"I've received the letter," Ryoma said, thanking the man with a smile. "Give Count Bergstone my regards."



"Mr. Sudou told me about him, but that man truly is something else. I've heard jokes of how the Japanese are all descended from ninjas, but maybe there's some truth to that. I can't believe he acclimated to this hellhole of a world this easily."

After leaving the estate, the man, whose name was Karl Ackerman, glanced back at the large castle looming over him. His eyes shone with a cold intelligence much different from the plain expression he'd worn earlier.

A few decades ago, Karl had been a normal medical student, but when he was summoned from Berlin, Germany, to a small country that had once existed in this world, any sense of normalcy disappeared.

A month after Karl was summoned, the O'tormea Empire destroyed the country that had summoned him. Karl had honestly contemplated suicide after that. Had O'tormea eradicated this country a month sooner, he wouldn't have been pulled into this world. It was enough to make him want to end it all. Of course, that country had only gambled on summoning someone because O'tormea had threatened to invade, but that didn't give Karl any comfort.

After fleeing the burning castle with nothing but the clothes on his back, Karl had moved from place to place for safety. He didn't engage in sports or martial arts, instead doing all he could to escape the winds of war. One day, as he squatted in an alleyway in a small town along the O'tormean border, he met Sudou. Through him, Karl became involved with the organization made up of otherworlders and their descendants.

Ever since then, despite not being good at dirty work, Karl had used his plain, unassuming appearance as a weapon. Some ninjas in Japan's Warring States period had used the same tactic. Their

activities had been incredibly varied, but they'd lived covertly within enemy territory, gathering information as they participated in the day-to-day life there. Occasionally they would engage in sabotage or assassination.

That said, my work isn't anything like one of those spies in the movies.

Karl had seen German spy films before, where the protagonists honed vast, versatile skill sets; engaged in exciting firefights; mastered martial arts; and, perhaps most important of all, charmed the ladies. Karl had once admired such movie characters, but he'd eventually realized that they didn't reflect reality whatsoever.

To begin with, Karl's job was nowhere near that dangerous. He'd been ordered to infiltrate the Kingdom of Rhoadseria, one of the three kingdoms in the east of the western continent.

Looking back on it, those days were dull and boring. And I used to hate that tedium.

The Organization primarily operated within the O'ltormea Empire and its surrounding countries, but that didn't mean it was cooperating with the empire per se. The Organization saw O'ltormea as a useful tool, and that tool required daily maintenance. After all, constant use could wear out its parts and even break it. Sometimes, in that instance, one could just exchange it. But some tools weren't so easily replaced, and after investing so much money and time into the empire, the Organization felt that O'ltormea was irreplaceable.

Honestly speaking, Karl's job wasn't to infiltrate the heart of Rhoadseria and expose its secrets. He was merely there to gather intelligence. He wasn't even supposed to sniff out secret information, but rather miscellaneous news and tidbits from Rhoadseria's everyday life—the weather on certain days, the market prices, the marriages among nobles, and the like.

Karl served Count Bergstone, yes, but after House Bergstone lost a power struggle in the court years ago, it was doubtful if any information Bergstone had would be valuable. In fact, Karl had only chosen to serve Count Bergstone's house because it was on the verge of collapse and the background checks they performed on new hires were cursory.

After all, who would snoop around a failing noble house? There was no reason for any of the family to be cautious. No one would reinforce the security on an empty vault. Plus, any talented people in service to a failing noble would pursue greener pastures. Indeed, most of Count Bergstone's servants had abandoned him like rats fleeing a sinking ship.

This had given Karl the perfect chance to gain Count Bergstone's trust despite being a new hire and the maneuverability he needed to do his job. Once he'd gained a solid footing, the rest had been simple.

He only relayed the information he'd gained once a month, so all in all, it was easy work.

That was all a thing of the past, though. His situation had changed and become much more stressful over the last few years.

The reason for that is clear as day.

It was Ryoma Mikoshiba.

Having spent more than a decade serving Count Bergstone, Karl had gradually built up trust with him. To demonstrate how trusted he was, just six months ago, he'd been allowed to marry the daughter of the family's housekeeper, who had served the count for many years. For a relatively new servant, this was quite generous. After all, the housekeeper managed Count Bergstone's estate in his place. Compared to Japanese history, this was like a wandering warrior marrying the daughter of a great daimyo's retainer.

Just a few days ago, the Organization had ordered Karl to look into the northern strip, which was now part of the Mikoshiba barony.

At first, I thought him burning down the ten houses' domains and flooding Epirus with refugees was simply to create unrest and eat through the soldiers' rations, but it seems he had some other reason.

Karl thought back to what he saw on the roads to Epirus—soldiers clad in black armor leading groups of farmers away. He'd only realized the meaning behind it when he stepped into Epirus proper.

He gathered them all there to take a census and organize the farming districts. Anyone who doesn't accept his rule is banished from his domain. His aim is obvious.

Of course, since governors collected taxes, there was some form of registry in this world, but it was very basic. The most they did was write down the number of men and women living in each village, but they didn't keep track of individual citizens' names and genders. However, the system Ryoma Mikoshiba had in mind was far beyond that. It allotted each individual their own identification number, much like the countries of his world did.

It's a fine idea. Any person who knows about modern society would have done this. But there's a major issue with his plan. This isn't our old world. Does Mikoshiba understand that?

Creating the world Ryoma sought was impossible with this world's technology, which was much less advanced no matter how one looked at it. Except for thaumaturgy, its technology was comparable to the Middle Ages. There was no internet, phones, or radios. The only way to deliver information was by hand, messenger pigeons, or smoke signals. The communication infrastructure was just too primitive.

On the other hand, this world did have one way to fix this problem, and the technology was already implemented. Actually, it was so deeply ingrained in people's daily lives that they completely

overlooked it.

Well, I have a hard time believing he doesn't have some idea. He's probably looking to use the guild's technology.

Ryoma would have to either steal it or negotiate for it. Given the guild's vast influence, stealing it by force would be a bad idea. He might temporarily defeat and take over a single branch of the guild, but the guild spanned the entire continent. They would eventually crush him with sheer numbers.

Karl knew one thing for certain, though.

If he isn't terribly stupid, he'll opt to negotiate for it. But there's one thing he doesn't expect. Or maybe... No, that's just meaningless conjecture.

Karl had a hunch, but nothing more. Either way, it was hard to tell at present which option Ryoma would pick, but sooner or later he'd try to contact the guild.

The big question was how the Organization would react. Unless they were ordered otherwise, the guild would probably assent to Ryoma's request. The guild would earn a lot from the monster ingredients it would receive from Wortenia. And now that northern Rhoadseria was under Ryoma's control, the Christof Company's reach had expanded. The guild would be willing to negotiate if it meant they'd get a slice of that pie when it was still fresh. And if all they had to do was hand over their technology...

The Organization wouldn't accept that, but the guild that served as their front might not feel the same way. All the same, there wasn't much Karl could do about it on his own; he had no relation with the guild. There was only one thing he could do.

"I need to contact Mr. Sudou," Karl whispered to himself as he hastened his steps. He soon passed through the walls of Epirus and began hurrying down the road south.

Karl failed to notice the gaze fixed on him from the shadows.



Karl didn't realize that he was being followed until about two hours after he left Epirus. Using martial thaumaturgy to reinforce his legs, he'd already traveled some forty or fifty kilometers to the south.

He was inside a forest covered in thick foliage. The sun was beginning to dip into the horizon, and there was no sign of anyone else walking along the highway. It was a perfect place to stage an attack.

Dammit... I let my guard down.

Karl had hurried so that he could report to Sudou as quickly as possible, but now he found himself in needless trouble. He'd neglected to mind his surroundings, and that had come back to bite him.

Blast! Who is this?! How long have they been following me? If they're

just bandits, I can fight my way out alone, but...

Karl hadn't had any special training as a spy, but he'd seen his share of carnage since coming to this world. Thanks to his otherworlder physiology that allowed him to absorb more prana from anything he slew, he soon gained the power of martial thaumaturgy. He could only activate his first chakra, the Muldahara chakra, but that gave him enough to engage in battle. He could fight off four or five bandits with ease, and if there were fewer than ten, he could break through them and run. However, if his pursuers weren't mere bandits, he could be in trouble.

Things might be difficult with just this weapon.

He carried a longsword strapped to his waist for self-defense. If he'd known that he would need to fight, he would've brought a bow or a short spear. He would've at least worn leather armor or chain mail, but his current mission didn't call for that. His job was simply to deliver an urgent message, so he'd decided to travel light. That decision now worked against him.

Just as that thought crossed his mind, Karl felt something skirt by his cheek.

"They attacked without warning?!"

He didn't know what had flown past him, but the intention behind it was clear. The enemy realized that Karl had noticed their pursuit and decided to preemptively attack.

For now, I have to hide.

Karl broke into a run, moving from the highway into the trees. Since the highway was built for traveling, it was open and offered plenty of visibility, but if his attackers could see where he was going, Karl would never manage to escape.

Here's to hoping I got away. Please don't let there be any monsters around!

Leaving the highway meant stepping outside of the barrier pillars' protection. And Karl had run into the woods, where monsters might be lurking. They weren't as ferocious as the ones on the Wortenia Peninsula, and they weren't a threat to someone who could use martial thaumaturgy, but there were no guarantees. At worst, he could run into a monster that equaled a natural disaster. Nonetheless, leaving the highway to hide in the forest was his only way to survive.

Having run into the woods, Karl quickly took cover behind a large tree.

Who sent these people? Are they from the Mikoshiba barony?

He slowly looked around. The silence hanging over the woods was palpable, and his labored breathing sounded terribly loud in his ears.

Unfortunately, it seemed his hope that he'd escaped was wishful thinking, because something else skimmed past his face with a

whistling sound. He somehow deflected it with his sword, but a second shot hidden behind the first gouged into his arm.

Sensing a third shot on its way to finish him off, Karl somehow managed to avoid it. The projectile, which looked like two cross-shaped blades stacked together, pierced the large tree. The weapon itself was unfamiliar in this world, but Karl knew what it was. He'd never seen it in real life before, but he'd seen it many times on the silver screen.

Isn't this a shiho shuriken?!

Karl felt a chill run down his spine. His body shivered, and he felt the strength drain from his limbs. He leaned against the tree, desperately trying to stay on his feet, but little by little, all the strength left his body and he collapsed to the ground.

Right. Shiho shurikens usually mean...

The most famous shiho shurikens, also known as flat shurikens or windmill-shaped shurikens, were mostly known as weapons ninjas used. In anime and manga, they were mostly depicted as spinning projectiles. Yet the truth was that flat shurikens were hardly lethal. Rod shurikens had more penetrating power. Still, flat shurikens were preferred because they were accurate and easy to master. After all, the rod shuriken only had one sharp point—the tip. Some variants had tips on both sides, but flat shurikens had four, making them four times more likely to damage their target. Nevertheless, given its shape, a flat shuriken didn't penetrate flesh that deeply, making it less lethal than the rod shuriken.

Because of the weapon's limitations, those who wielded flat shurikens often applied poison to them. Karl knew that, but he'd never imagined he would experience it firsthand. Before long, his entire body went numb.

As Karl started spasming, a shadow wearing a face mask appeared behind him. Based on the outline of their body, the figure was a woman. Another black figure emerged on her right, and two others appeared to surround Karl.

Judging by their physiques, the last three were men, and based on their attitude, there were more waiting in the forest. Apparently, a large number of people had been sent after Karl.

“Lady Sakuya...” one of the shadows said to the woman standing behind him.

The woman nodded briskly and began rummaging through Karl's clothes for something that might clarify his identity.

I know the lord has keen intuition, but is this man really some kind of spy? Sakuya thought.

Sakuya had direct orders from Gennou to go after Karl. Without a

doubt, if Gennou was right and an enemy spy had infiltrated Count Bergstone's ranks, it would be a major issue. However, Sakuya had some misgivings about the fact that Karl was under suspicion because of Ryoma's gut feeling.

I'll fulfill my orders no matter what, of course...

As soon as that thought crossed her mind, her hand touched something.

There's something hidden in his clothes, around the stomach.

She pulled the object up, revealing an inner pocket. She opened it and found a piece of rolled up parchment—a map. It was a highly detailed map of the northern regions with notes jotted down in letters Sakuya didn't recognize.

I see. These letters are probably some kind of cipher. If he's hiding something like this, the lord was right.



Feeling guilty for doubting Ryoma, Sakuya reached into a sack hanging from her waist and took out a small pill. She pulled Karl's body up from the ground and forced the pill into his mouth. One of the other figures handed her a leather water sack, and Sakuya used it to force Karl to ingest the pill.

"We have a lot to ask you," Sakuya said. "And we'll ask you over and over until you start being honest."

Karl went pale with fright. He was scared of the torture ahead of him, but he was more worried about the fact that they were outside the barrier pillars. The scent of blood could draw monsters.

"S-Stop... This is...the middle of...the forest..." he muttered, trying to warn them of the danger even though his lips were numb.

"Don't worry about that," Sakuya said with a cold smile. "There are ten to twenty trained Igasaki ninjas spread out around the area. Forget the monsters. Even if your people tried to attack us and take you back, we'd defeat them."

Her smile was much more menacing than anything Sakuya had ever shown Ryoma.

"So rest easy," she said softly. "We've got plenty of time to loosen your tongue."

With that, Sakuya drew a dagger from her hip.



That night, Ryoma felt the faint presence of someone approaching him, which roused him from his sleep. It was two hours past midnight, a time when the world was fully asleep. Confirming that the dagger and chain he left under his pillow were still there, Ryoma quietly waited to see what his unknown visitor would do.

That said, even though Ryoma didn't have Epirus fully under his control yet, he was in Count Salzberg's estate, the single most heavily defended place in the city. He also had the Igasaki clan's skilled ninjas keeping watch on his room. Not even Ryoma's closest aides, like Lione and Boltz, could enter his room that easily. His guards would intercept any invader, so the possibility that the intruder was an assassin was absurdly slim.

But despite all the security, Ryoma remained vigilant. No matter how well guarded he was, carelessness could render it all useless. History had taught Ryoma that very well.

I wouldn't want to meet the same end as Nobunaga Oda.

Nobunaga Oda was a grand conqueror in Japan's Warring States period who'd etched his name into Japan's history. But just as he was on the verge of unifying Japan, he met a tragic end in Honnoji Temple in Kyoto at the hands of one of his lieutenants, Mitsuhide Akechi.

There were still many mysteries surrounding the Honnoji Incident. It was said that, at the time, Nobunaga's army—including the forces of his son, Nobutada—was fewer than a thousand men, a force too small for a man on the cusp of unifying the land. House Oda had half of Japan under its control, so if Nobunaga had wanted, he could have had tens of thousands of soldiers guarding him.

It was hard to tell if Nobunaga had predicted Mitsuhide's treachery. House Oda controlled Kyoto at the time, so perhaps he had. But then again, he might not have seen the betrayal coming, so it was difficult to determine if his choice to keep his force small was careless. Still, one could handle even unforeseen developments by preparing for any contingency beforehand, so the fact that Nobunaga didn't see it coming was no excuse.

Ryoma saw it as conceit and carelessness on Nobunaga's part. It was proof that there was no such thing as impenetrable security. Nobunaga had probably thought to the very end that no one could possibly oppose him.

The only one who can keep me totally safe is me.

The important thing was to never rule out any possibility.

A shadow stirred in the corner of the room, and Ryoma heard someone say, "Milord, my apologies for coming in so late."

"Gennou?" Ryoma asked as he turned in his bed.

"Yes. I come bearing a report."

"About what I asked you to handle? How did it go?"

"Your suspicions were correct. We dealt with him as per your orders."

Ryoma clicked his tongue.

It's the hunches you hope are wrong that end up being right on the money.

Ryoma understood why Gennou hadn't waited until morning and instead came straight away to make the report, but at this rate, he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep without first hearing what Gennou had to say.

Dammit. They say a lack of sleep damages your looks.

"I see," Ryoma replied. "I'm sure Wortenia's monsters are happy to have something to snack on for a change. So, what did you learn?"



Gennou, who was kneeling in the corner of Ryoma's room, got to his feet.

"Is now a good time?" he asked.

"Yeah, give me a minute."

Ryoma got out of bed and lit the candle sitting on his bedside table.

"We found this on him," Gennou said, handing over a roll of parchment.

Ryoma scanned it. It was a map of the roads in Rhoadseria's northern regions, with Epirus at its center. It was highly detailed—good enough for military use, even. An ordinary man wouldn't be carrying a map like this one.

Ryoma sighed. "Well, would you look at that? He really was a spy."

Ryoma had sensed something off about the man's words, so he'd had the messenger followed. As it turned out, he was right to do so.

I swear, they keep popping up like cockroaches.

Ryoma couldn't be blamed for being so exasperated. Ever since he conquered Epirus, he'd been fighting a long and seemingly endless war with assorted spies skulking about the city. On top of that, O-Ume of the Igasaki clan, who was in charge of Sirius's security, had said that the number of spies attempting to infiltrate Wortenia had almost doubled. Thankfully, Sirius's topography was perfect for setting up a counterintelligence network that could stave off spies, but the same could not be said of Epirus and its surroundings.

Epirus's security is fine because I have Gennou's people taking care of it, but...

No matter how cautious and meticulous they were, information was bound to leak from somewhere. That didn't mean they couldn't take steps to counter it, though. An imperfect defense was no excuse to stop striving for perfection anyway. That included deciding ahead of time what they would do should any intelligence leak.

Now, the question is, who sent him?

The most likely suspects were Queen Lupis or nobles loyal to her. Be that as it may, the letters written on the map bothered him.

This is a mix of Roman and Arabic numerals.

This world's common language was entirely different from Rearth's. The letters and numerals were nothing alike. Thankfully, people who were summoned had some kind of translation power instilled in them, so they could speak and read. When Ryoma was summoned by the O'tormea Empire's court thaumaturgist, Gaius Valkland, Ryoma had been able to converse with Gaius like normal. However, this world's people would only ever use this language.

Which means one of two things...

Ryoma suspected that people from his world were involved.



Seven days had passed since Count Bergstone's messenger went missing. A splendid carriage rolled through Epirus's gates, guarded by knights in decorated armor. The carriage's entourage was holding up the banner of the Rhoadserian royal family. The reason for their arrival in Epirus went without saying. Everyone across the northern regions knew why.

As the carriage advanced toward the Salzberg estate in the city's center, the residents looked on with anxiety and fear, praying that the sparks of a new war wouldn't blow their way.



"So, this is their subpoena?" Lione asked, seated at a round table. She started reading through the document. It was written on white, high-grade paper that was pleasant to the touch.

This seems like overkill. Paper like this costs one silver for a single sheet, and they could've just used parchment. I guess they're determined to stand on ceremony.

The primary writing material in this world was parchment similar in feel to tanned leather. This kind of refined paper was rare, and even parchment could be a luxury. Depending on where one lived or what their financial standing was, they might use thin sheets of wood in place of paper. It wasn't unheard of, at least. Only the guild, a powerful presence throughout the continent, had the financial means to use paper on a day-to-day basis.

"It doesn't say anything about what you're charged with," Boltz said, peering over Lione's shoulder.

The letter just stated that Ryoma was to present himself before the House of Lords, as well as the date and time he was to do so. It was so concise that had it not been stamped by Rhoadseria's sigil and delivered by a group of elite soldiers under the House of Lords, Lione would have doubted its authenticity.

Lione nodded. "Yeah. Honestly, I don't know much about letters like this, but considering they're callin' a baron over, you'd think they'd be less...terse, I s'pose?"

As an adventurer, Lione received all manner of requests, both on and off the battlefield. She had experience patrolling noble territories and guarding aristocrats, and she'd even taken dangerous jobs like serving as a revolting noble's private army. But she didn't know much about society's underworld, nor was she knowledgeable about

legislation.

The only time I can remember something like this was when I was a kid and my parents couldn't pay their taxes. The tax collector thrust a writ of execution in their faces.

She couldn't remember the contents of the writ, just the smug, greedy smile on the tax collector's face, as well as her parents' tormented expressions. Lione's parents had been forced to give away both their home and the crops they'd stored, so they'd eventually left their village to become refugees.

This was how Lione ended up becoming a mercenary. And since she'd never had a permanent residence in any one village, she wasn't familiar with the laws. She wasn't even registered as a citizen anywhere.

Signus Galveria had the answer to Lione's misgivings.

"This summons is merely calling for him to serve as a witness," he explained.

"So they're not calling him to punish him as a criminal?" Boltz asked, surprised. "The letter Count Bergstone sent the other day said the House of Lords was now hostile toward him because of the war."

Being called to a trial as an offender and being summoned to testify as a witness were two different things, and it went without saying which of the two was better for Ryoma.

Robert Bertrand shook his head and sighed. "Don't make me laugh," he spat. "There's no way that would happen after everything Ryoma has done."

Boltz simply shrugged. He knew it wouldn't happen that way, not after Ryoma slew Count Salzberg and seized northern Rhoadseria. After all, almost half of the ten houses of the north—including Signus's and Robert's families—were wiped out. Even in this war-torn world, power struggles among governors rarely went that far.

"Robert's right," Signus said. "It's unlikely the House of Lords will sit back and watch. Bonds of blood mean everything to nobles. And with all due respect, my lord, you're a nobody who rose to status. No noble alive would ignore someone like you killing their relatives and wiping out entire noble lines, not even if they were gutless cowards who only cared about saving their own hides."

Signus was probably resentful of the nobles, because while his tone was calmer and more polite than Robert's, his words were almost outright insults. Signus had lived his entire life on the battlefield, so he thought that the nobles who lived safely in their domains off the tax money of their subjects were nothing more than parasites.

"So this letter is meant to lure the lad to the capital?" Boltz asked.

"It's safe to assume that that's exactly what it is," Signus answered. "They probably thought that if they summoned Ryoma as

the accused, he might resort to force right then and there. At that point, it would stop being a skirmish between governors and snowball into something else. Queen Lupis doesn't want that. In which case..."

Signus turned to his new lord, who'd remained silent throughout this meeting.

"You mean they called me to the capital as a 'witness' so they could execute me as a criminal?" Ryoma asked.



Signus nodded gravely. "That's probably it."

The House of Lords was essentially the body that governed and administered justice within Rhoadseria. It was both the court and the prosecutor. The only one who could oppose their decisions was Queen Lupis. Also, they didn't operate on any notions of fairness or true justice. They would rule Ryoma guilty no matter what, so whatever Ryoma said to defend himself in trial would be meaningless.

Nonetheless, despite the gravity of the situation, neither Ryoma nor Signus looked the slightest bit bothered.

"That's what we expected, right?" Ryoma asked.

Everyone at the table nodded.

Ryoma slowly looked around at those in attendance. Some, like Laura and Sara, had served him for a long time, whereas others, like Robert and Signus, had only joined his side after he'd defeated Count Salzberg. Yet all of their eyes were brimming with confidence.

"All right. Let's begin then. We have a kingdom to take over," Ryoma said with a coolness that didn't reflect the emotion behind his words. He said it with the same nonchalant tone he might use to announce that he was going for a walk.



"Isn't it about time they arrived?"

Charlotte Halcyon nodded at her father. "Yes, assuming there were no setbacks, they should arrive today at noon."

"Good. It's getting to the point where I can't keep the more vocal nobles in check. They are outraged, but I somehow stopped them from lashing out. It's about time we resolved this."

Charlotte's father, Duke Arthur Halcyon, gave a satisfied nod. Serving as the head of the House of Lords had been tiring as of late, and the reason for that was obvious. It was because of that whelp who ignored all manner of aristocratic courtesy and honor and wiped out most of the ten houses' families. And it fell to Arthur to handle his punishment.

I swear, Queen Lupis ordered me to handle one bothersome job. It would've been simpler if she'd just gathered all the nobles and crushed him.

There were several hundred noble families in Rhoadseria, some small and some large. Still, gathering all of them to unite as one was practically impossible, at least for the purpose of national defense. But Queen Lupis wouldn't need that big of an army to crush one upstart noble.

While the majority of the ten houses were wiped out during the northern rebellion, over fifty other houses had blood ties with them. They would've gladly pooled their militaries to form an army of over

ten thousand. And if the House of Lords had sent the knight order that served them to join that army, their victory would have been assured—even against a man praised as a national hero.

This was Duke Halcyon's stance on the matter, but his own daughter, Charlotte, had put a stop to that idea.

Was I wrong to let her serve in the royal family's court since she was little?

Having his daughter serve as a close aide to Queen Lupis gave him a significant edge in the palace's power struggles, that much was for sure. Charlotte's influence was a major reason the nobles' faction wanted Duke Halcyon on their side so badly. But her influence also came at a price. Charlotte's wit was sharper than he'd accounted for. Of course, he didn't want her to be ignorant, but her intelligence struck fear into the hearts of those around her, so she couldn't find a groom. This was a major cause for concern.

More importantly, if Charlotte wanted to keep her position at Queen Lupis's side, she had to adhere to the queen's requests and demands with absolute obedience. On paper, Charlotte was Queen Lupis's head court lady, but on a more personal level, Charlotte was her good friend. They had known each other since infancy, and Queen Lupis felt Charlotte was as much a friend as Meltina was. She could turn to Charlotte for support in order to withstand the pressures of being sovereign. Queen Lupis wouldn't turn down a request from Charlotte easily, but Charlotte couldn't refuse Queen Lupis's demands.

Well, I decided to accept Her Majesty's demands this time on Charlotte's recommendation, but...

At first, Duke Halcyon had merely been concerned. Ryoma Mikoshiba was nothing more than a man with luck on his side. But he'd changed his stance when Ryoma killed Count Salzberg during the northern rebellion. He now firmly swore that Ryoma Mikoshiba had to be eliminated. The problem, however, was how to eliminate him.

"Charlotte, I have to ask one more time. Are you sure this is for the best?" Duke Halcyon questioned.

Charlotte nodded. "Yes, father. You have my apologies for the many adjustments you had to make to accommodate for this, but..."

Duke Halcyon loudly scoffed. He knew she would answer like that, but it was still unpleasant to hear.

"Very well. Things need only go according to plan after this," Duke Halcyon said.

"Yes. Father, Her Majesty is very grateful for your assistance."

The Duke nodded in satisfaction. After all the effort and time he'd put into this, he couldn't afford for Queen Lupis to be displeased with him.

A smile played on Charlotte's lips as she watched her father. She

looked at him as if he were an ignorant jester dancing on the palm of her hand.

Afterword

I doubt there are many such readers left, but I welcome any new readers who picked up the series with this volume. And to those of you who have kept up with the series since volume 1, it's been four months since the last volume. This is Ryota Hori, the author.

Volume 15 is now successfully published. But, as always, I only finished writing it right on the deadline. I've no doubt caused some trouble for the editors and the novel's illustrator, as well as everyone else involved with the book.

You all have my sincerest apologies. I was actually worried my editor might drop by any day to tell me the series was canceled because of my tardiness. This might seem like an excuse, but holding another job in addition to this influenced things, and I couldn't stick to my original schedule.

My main job is in IT, and depending on which project I'm on, I get sent to different locations. I'm a full-time employee in my company, but my work is similar in nature to that of an agency employee. Getting used to the new work environment, the coworkers, and the atmosphere of a workplace is very important, but I could never quite get used to the site I left last year in terms of greeting the people, moving the work along, and the like. I simply couldn't adjust to the place, and there was no conversation between my coworkers and superiors.

I worked there for four months, but the manager who helped me on my first day there was about the only one kind enough to ask me how I was doing...and that was only because I ran into him in the elevator! But still, even that much can mean the world.

Of course, the other side also had a point. It's a very busy workplace, and they don't necessarily have time to train a newcomer. The way I conducted myself probably had its inadequacies too.

But the whole affair did stress me out a great deal, which snowballed into me drinking more. It was awful. Last year, I had to beg my company to let me take a five-month leave for medical reasons, and despite the fact that I'd recovered, this happened. I kept going to the gym, but it didn't help relieve my stress as much as I'd hoped. And maybe I just used the stress as an excuse to drink.

There is this yakitori place on my way to work that's always full of customers. Passing by is a constant seduction! The smell is

irresistible! But since I was told to avoid fried foods, I held back and settled on frequenting a skewer restaurant instead! And I've been avoiding two of my favorite foods, gristle and fried chicken. I love eating clams during winter, but when I order them, I always end up buying five more than I should.

I figured I needed to practice self-restraint, or this could become bad for my health. After all, people inherently don't want to inhibit their desires. But once you lose your restraints, you end up tumbling down as far as your desires will take you.

Either way, despite working in the IT industry for some ten-odd years, last year was honestly the first time I've ever felt so out of my element or struggled this much to get along with my coworkers in a workplace. It came as something of a shock to me, since I believe I'm actually quite good at getting along with people.

I imagine this experience will go on to influence the style and characters of *Record of Wortenia War*. In fact, most of the characters in this series are based on the likeness of people I've met in the past, so that influence is bound to come.

Now then, let's put aside my ramblings about life and the style of the book and get into our usual commentary.

The highlight of volume 15 is the discussion on Robert and Signus's relationship. After Signus slipped a sleeping drug into Robert's drink in volume 14, Robert wakes to find himself a captive. What will become of him? And then there's Signus...

Isn't that kind of rugged, rustic friendship between men lovely? Sadly, I've never had such a friend. In fact, I have very few people I can call friends in general. Plenty of acquaintances, but not many friends, and certainly no friendships where I would forgive someone after they'd betrayed me once.

But while Signus encourages Robert to join Ryoma's service, things don't go that smoothly. Robert, with his rebellious spirit, won't join with Ryoma unless a certain condition is met.

There's also Lady Yulia's story. Ryoma killed her husband, but what burns in her heart? Is it a desire to take revenge for her husband, or a newfound passion and love for the man who freed her from an abusive marriage? Someone stands in Lady Yulia's way, though. Simone...and also the twins. Or, well, that's what it would be like if this series were a sappy soap opera. But it isn't! I couldn't write one if I tried.

Anyway, that was volume 15. Volume 16 should come out in July, if all goes as planned. I'm already preparing to work hard on it, so please look forward to it! Thankfully, the work site I started working at this year is fine, and I'm getting along with my coworkers swimmingly. I don't know how long I'll be working there, but I think

it's a fine place...except for the fact that it's quite far from home and the trains are always packed. Isn't there a work site that's blessed with good people, close to home, and has a nice pub near the station? If anyone knows one, please let me know!

Lastly, I'd like to thank everyone involved with the release of this novel, and most of all, the readers who picked up this book. Please continue supporting *Record of Wortenia War*!

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Record of Wortenia War: Volume 15

by Ryota Hori

Translated by ZackZeal

Edited by Suzanne Seals

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0.1: August 2022

Premium E-Book